

Softened

Fated Archangels:
Lucifer's Prequel

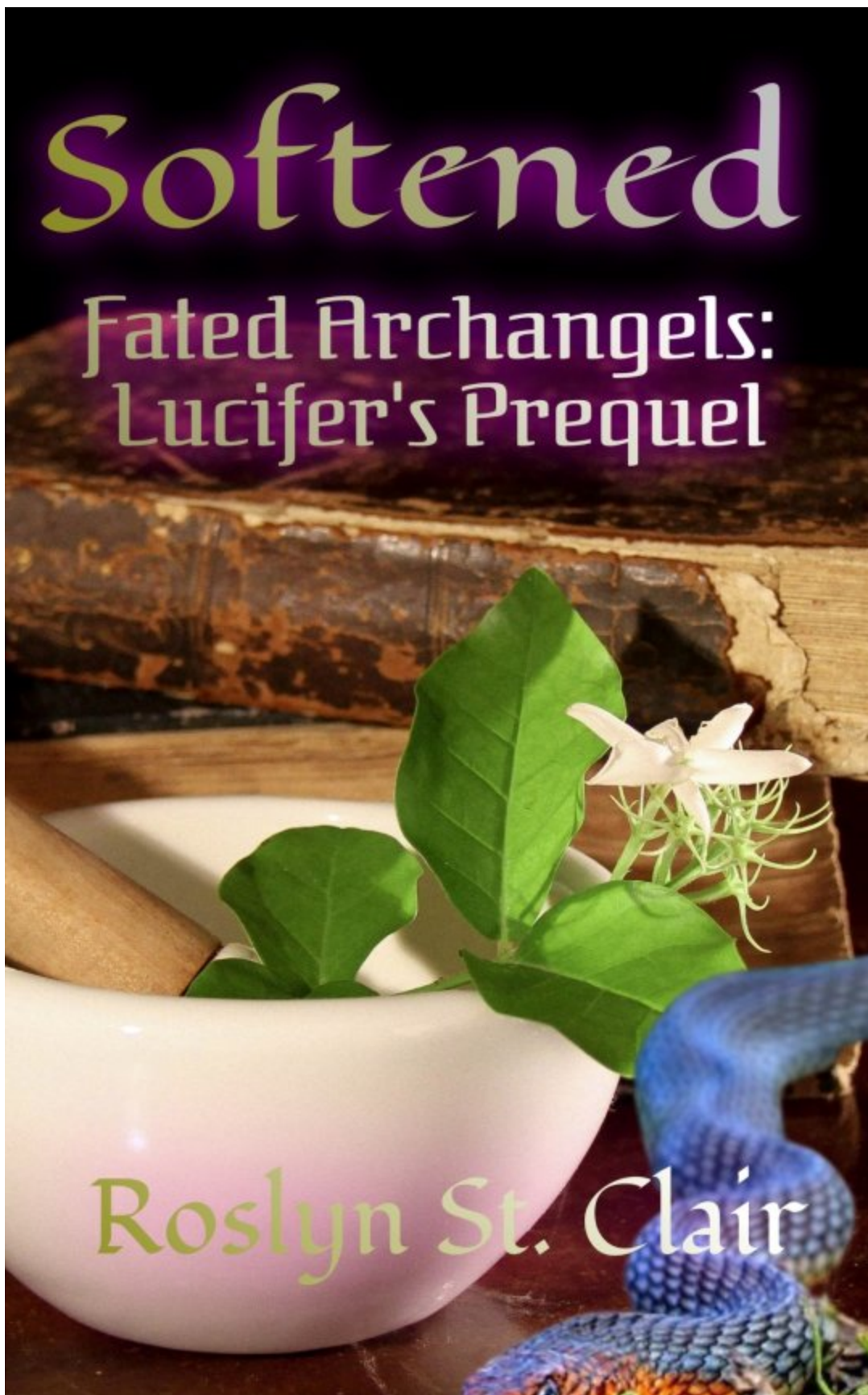
Roslyn St. Clair



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SOFTENED

A Prequel To:

MARKED - Fated Archangels: Book One

Lucifer's Temptation

Roslyn St. Clair

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[“Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven.” -John Milton, Paradise Lost | But maybe that’s not the whole truth...](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[Author’s Note:](#)

[MARKED | FATED ARCHANGELS: BOOK ONE - | LUCIFER’S
TEMPTATION | Excerpt Chapter One | By: Roslyn St. Clair](#)

[CHAPTER ONE: Present Day: Assault and Jeopardy.](#)

[Author’s Note:](#)

[About the Author](#)

Dedicated to S.C. Principale, one of my favorite authors whose help in launching my line has been immeasurable and enormous – and for which I am eternally grateful. If you haven't read her books, run, don't walk, to your favorite purveyor of spicy paranormal and monster romances and try some...



**“Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in
Heaven.” -John Milton, Paradise Lost**
But maybe that’s not the whole truth...

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All characters and situations are solely the result of the author's imagination, and any crossover to this world and reality, or the people operating within it, is purely coincidental. Of course, as Lucifer would tell you, there are no accidents, but only synchronicity. Any imagined connection might just be a sign directing you toward a greater truth: we are all archetypes, with more similarity than difference.

End chapter taken from, "*Marked*" – *Fated Archangels: Book One, Lucifer's Temptation.*

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CHAPTER ONE

EIGHTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD Verdetta Maille had a secret: she was about to have sex with the devil.

To that end, she gazed around the empty hallway and snapped her bedroom door shut behind her. For a moment, she hesitated, and laid her hand flat against the wood. Most likely, she would never see the room again. If her luck held.

A nurse turned into the corridor at the far end of the passageway, but kept her attention fixed upon a clipboard until she disappeared into the infirmary on the right. Verdetta let out her breath. Slowly. So far, so good, but the hard part was almost upon her: sneaking out through the lobby without having to explain where she was going or why she was weighed down by a heavy backpack nearly half her height in size.

Not that anyone would believe her if she disclosed her intentions. Even if she threw a party to celebrate, they would only laugh at her once she couldn't muster the breath to blow out the candles on the congratulatory sheet cake. She was known for her wicked sense of humor, not to mention how everyone accepted she was too respectable, too well-heeled, and too far past her prime to engage in such juvenile and dangerous shenanigans.

Which was all true- except it wasn't.

She clipped her walker forward, her footsteps steadier than she had imagined they might be. Twice, she had to stop and rest until her breath no longer rasped and clattered. At the entrance to the lobby, she paused again to take the measure of the room. It crawled with residents.

Verdetta gathered her reserves. She could do this.

Because if someone chanced to see beneath her decrepitating exterior to the ageless nature of her wilding soul and believed she would try to summon the devil? Still, no one would expect her to be *physically* capable of performing any sexual act thereafter.

Which, again, was mostly true. Her body was no longer a trilling brook waiting to be forded. No force existed powerful enough to rocket her all-but-dead anatomy into an arousal it no longer remembered.

However, nothing prevented her from simply lying there while *The Big Bad* did the dirty. Plus, she had a back-up plan. If her rolls of sagging skin, unruly fat, and brittle bones didn't entice the original dark lord into an

erection, she would ask him to close his eyes. If he used his imagination- and really, he should have a pretty good one, all things considered- he could picture some young, alluring beauty sucking him to orgasm, while it was her mouth doing the deed. Certain presidents might not count blowjobs as sex, but she wasn't so particular.

And she had always been a good sucker. It probably wasn't a skill one forgot.

A thrill ran through her as she considered her plans. Goosebumps dotted her overwarm flesh. Even if the leader of Hell turned out to be monstrous, red of skin, hooved, and carrying a pitchfork rather than the beautiful archangel of lore, she already wanted to take him in her mouth. A woman held a certain power with a penis on her tongue, a way to top from below. And she would chance everything for the smallest blip of control. She could ride out with her head held high. Proverbially, since blowjobs required a certain bending of the neck.

Hefting the dirty backpack higher on her hunched shoulders, she perused the lobby of the *Shady Grove Retirement Home*. The large space bustled with walkers and zombie-like seniors shuffling toward their next adventure. Behind the desk, Harold Cutter, the overweight security guard, snored like a train whistle.

Perfect.

Emerging into the open space, she clumped her walker across the laminate flooring. The tennis balls on the two front legs helped her glide. She had almost made it to the sliding glass exit doors when Burton Saxton hailed her from where he stood next to the fish tank.

"Verdetta, where are you going? Come look at Buster. I think he might be dead."

The announcement had no effect on the other residents or the slumbering security guard. Which made sense. Announcing a death at Shady Grove was a bit like saying there would be chocolate pudding at lunch. Sugary desert and bodies turned up daily.

Caught, she picked her way to where Burton stood between the fish and his best friend. Buster, mouth open, slumped upon the bench, his head tilted back. His circle of balding pate pressed against the window pane. She leaned forward and checked for breath.

When she straightened to her normal comma shape, she shook her head. "Gone." She patted Burton's arm. "I'm sorry, but it's better than the

way Jamie Peterson went out a couple days ago.” Jamie had come in a vegetable, lasted three months, and exited life in the same state she had arrived, hooked to beeping machines, with the smell of disinfectant in her nose, and mouthwash no doubt burning the interior of her mouth so her breath wouldn’t stink up her room.

After Jamie’s death, Verdetta had plummeted to the lowest point of her existence, knowing she, too, was bound to follow in similar fashion. She had plunked herself down on one of the fake-leather chairs in the lobby and decided to sit there until the stupid world ended. As fate would have it, the Glory Bus was getting ready to shuffle the residents into town. The driver, thinking she waited to hop on, hustled her into the penile-shaped brown van. She hadn’t had the strength to argue. When her fellow residents had traipsed into *Barron’s Used Book Emporium*, she followed.

She wasn’t certain why she had chosen to browse the gardening section. Shady Grove didn’t have a garden, and she certainly wasn’t capable of forcing a shovel into the hard-packed New Jersey earth. But when she had removed a fat volume faded into indecipherability, it had snagged on something behind it. Pulling at the hidden brown leather, she had discovered the codex wedged behind the shelving. Everything had changed.

“I don’t understand,” Burton was saying. “We were going to run away. I have a bag packed under my bed. So did Buster. You know, they never clean under the beds.”

Verdetta nodded. She knew. “You can still escape on your own, Burton. Better a last day in the sun than safe and snug in a Shady Grove bed.”

His gaze snagged on her backpack. “Hey, isn’t that my grandson’s? What are you doing with it?”

She shuffled a bit, and hitched the falling pack higher once more. “Escaping. I paid him twenty dollars and some licorice whips. He drew me a map, too.” She looked over her shoulder as far as she was able. Harold, the security guard, still perfumed the air with his snores. “Give me five minutes before you sound the alarm on Buster?”

His face drooping, Burton sniffed. “Sure. You picked a good time to skedaddle, Verdetta. Right after First Pills and before Lunch Pills. They won’t miss you for a couple hours, so long as you evade Delores.” He gestured with his chin toward Delores Malmsey, one of the younger residents who liked to poke her nose into everybody’s business. Happily,

she was flirting with Severin Matthews, the real estate lawyer who had come to solicit properties from the nearly dead and dying. Delores had Severin backed into a corner, and she faced away from the door.

“If you see her turn around...”

“I’ll try to distract her. Anyway, good luck out there, and don’t you rush. I’ll sit next to Buster for a half hour before I notice his condition. It’s not like he’s going anywhere in a hurry, plus...” He nodded at her walker.

“Speed of snail. It is a disadvantage.” And not the least of them. “Goodbye for now, Burton. And I’m truly sorry about Buster.”

With another pat on his arm, she rotated the walker in three turns and picked her way to the door. The other residents didn’t seem to realize she was making a housebreak, but if they did, no one shouted an alarm.

It took the better part of the twenty minutes to clear the narrow edge of grass lawn. A forest stretched in front of her for almost half a mile. The muscles in her legs and shoulders already ached and screamed for her to stop, but she didn’t listen to them. Instead, she patted her curls and began picking her way through the light undergrowth and deciduous leaves to the clearing she had in mind. She couldn’t summon the Prince of Darkness into the lobby of Shady Grove with its stench of despair and endings, could she?

She still had some dignity left.

Summoning Lucifer was the most exciting thing she had done in sixty years, and if it wasn’t enough to atone for the ordinary life she had led, at least it was a start. She was going to go out on a blaze, not limp there strapped to an IV and riding the stink of ammonia.

Armed with the scouting backpack filled with provisions and the ancient codex, plus the map Burton Saxton’s grandson had drawn, she kicked through dead leaves as fast as her feet would take her. The timing was going to be tight. A couple hours for travel through the woods, though it once would have taken her five minutes to stroll. Call up Lucifer – ten minutes should do it, since she had organized in advance. Assuming *The Big Bad* didn’t strike her dead on the spot, they could eat the meal she had prepared in twenty minutes, or thirty if he liked to linger. As for the act itself... ten minutes? Fifteen at most.

Just enough time to conclude before the inevitable search party set out to find her. Or her body. It really depended on what kind of mood the devil was in.

She ducked under a leafy branch and stumbled over a protruding root. Catching herself, she took a quick breath and huffed along. Two minutes later, another tree decided to foil her. She fell to her knees, landing on a soft patch of moss. Using the trunk to help take her weight, she mountaineered to standing before brushing off her skirt and continuing on the treacherous journey. Every myth ever written set requirements for magic, and chief among those requirements was the need for perseverance. Nothing came for free in the world, especially the god of it.

When finally she tripped from shadowed forest into grassy glen, wildflowers springing in hot pinks, whites, yellows, and pale blues toward the full-broke sun, she let the heavy backpack slip down her crepey arms. Ignoring the way her heart hammered and her breath wheezed, she shook out the blanket and lobbed the containers of food toward the center. Next came paper plates and some plastic cutlery. Bending to right the contents, she winced as pain shot down her stiff back. No matter. She had come too far to stop because of some twinges.

Finished with the preliminaries, she removed a tiny tray from the pack and set it atop her walker. It balanced - just. When she was certain it stood steady enough, she withdrew a fat black candle and set it upon the wood. She had ordered the candle and a tiny vial of oud oil online within minutes of translating the spell. The candle came from a satanic supply store in New York. The guaranteed pure oud oil came from a merchant in Syria. The cost for both had nearly wiped her out, even with the sale of her mother's pearl and amethyst brooch to the nasty nurse, Nettie Parker, for a fraction of its worth. Overnight air from the Middle East didn't come cheap, but when a woman reached halfway through her octogenarian years, she measured her life in minutes, not days.

Studying the two ingredients, she bit her bottom lip between her teeth. Was the candle thick enough? The blurb under the shop's candle section said that any demon summoned would only remain so long as the taper burned, which meant the thicker the width of wax, the better. She might require some time to convince Lucifer to have sex with her.

And the oud oil- well, there she had no doubts. The scent was magic itself. According to her laptop research, oud was an expensive and rare substance. Young *Aquilaria* trees infected with the *Phialophora parasitica*, a special kind of fungus, produced the valuable, redolent resin in their bark and wood. The scent transported Verdetta to another world,

metaphorically, at any rate, and each time she sniffed the small vial, she uncovered different sensual notes. Sometimes the oil smelled smoky. Sometimes a bit like damp wood. Sometimes a musky pheromone took precedence. Sometimes a fresh green scent sweetened the air.

It was as changeable and diverse as the Lucifer-Satan-Beelzebub descriptions throughout history. It should draw him.

She set the vial aside.

A crushed white sprig of night-blooming jasmine, some common stemmed sage and rosemary, a mortar and pestle, and the darkest red-black rose the town florist had been able to find followed onto the tray. *Midnight Magic*, the rose was called, which seemed half-appropriate, as she would summon Lucifer at midday. It was an Ecuadorian variety most shops didn't stock because of the price, but the florist adjacent to the cemetery catered to high-end weddings as well as death. He could use his overages in his fancy casket covers. If Lucifer killed her, maybe he would use them in hers.

Acquiring the night-blooming jasmine had troubled her until she remembered Mr. Marcedi's daughter had given him a pot of the fragrant flowers for his birthday. It seemed an odd gift for a man obsessed with baseball, but what did she know? She had snagged a sprig while pretending to study his prized collection of memorabilia, signed by some men who had proved talented at either throwing balls or possessing balls. She still wasn't certain which.

The rest of the ingredients she had purchased after the Glory Bus posted a flier announcing a surprise trip to the nearby mall. Forced to borrow another hundred from Mrs. Jamkowski at the usurious interest rate of twenty percent, she had located mortar, pestle, and fresh, stemmed herbs at the fancy cookware store that charged four times what any sane soul would pay for common kitchen implements. She had happily provided the lucre.

Verdetta took a deep breath, the deepest she could with the way her lungs objected, and studied the objects on the tray. Everything looked okay. Fingers crossed.

Drawing out the ancient leather codex, she took another moment to smooth the cover and still her fast-beating heart. Written on vellum, hopefully animal skin and not human epidermis, the ink resembled the color of dried blood. A similar stain obscured the frontal page. The codex

was also a palimpsest. Older Greek writing had not been entirely scrubbed from the margins. On the corner of the spell page, someone, maybe a disgruntled student, had scribbled, “Aeneas can kiss my left elbow.” An online dictionary had easily translated the words.

But the palimpsest was no odder than the rest of the text she translated, also on her laptop, after her grandson had provided the name of the language in which it had been written. Rodney claimed to work for *The Office of Regional Management* in the urban development department, but all the family understood he was really employed as a desk-jockey for the CIA. He hadn’t been pleased when his super-computers had deciphered the sample script she texted him after copying a single word onto lined paper and photographing it with her phone. The same symbols had been inscribed on the bottom of each page of the codex like a signature. Sure enough, the wonders of technology had worked to her advantage. The whole affair had taken no more than eight minutes, though Rodney had freaked out, just the tiniest bit, before admitting the symbols were Enochian.



Samael.

When she had asked who the heck was Samael, he had told her in clipped tones: the fallen angel, the devil, also known as Lucifer, the lightbearer.

Over-excited by nature, Rodney had begun peppering her with questions, all of which she avoided by claiming to have seen the symbols scribbled in an old dictionary at the library. The lack of immediate danger posed by some imagined newly-risen satanic cult had settled him.

She had become inflamed.

Stroking the cover, Verdetta examined it once more. It looked to be sixteenth or seventeenth century, if she were to postulate a guess, though its antiquity was as irrelevant as her own. Having bargained with the bookstore owner, she had purchased it for fifty cents. The entire trip home on the Glory Bus, she had clutched it in her hands as an almost feverish longing overtook her with the need to decipher the the strange letters. Once armed with the name of the language, she had located the alphabet online and translated the middle page set apart from the other writing by the inclusion of two decorative scrolls.

And when she had learned what the page revealed, excitement had unfurled within her like a bud in spring. It still bloomed in her secret heart, the place filled with her memories and experiences mostly withered by generalities and too-long survival.

With another deep breath, she de-leafed the herbs, threw the stems to the earth, and ground the follioles into fine powder with the mortar and pestal. The night-blooming jasmine followed the herbs, and when crushed gave off an oily, fragrant residue. The rose went next. It didn't mash up as quickly, and the scent it released proved sickeningly sweet. Once the mixture attained the consistency of gruel and her arm quivered with forgotten exercise, she added three drops of the precious oud oil. Before she replaced the stopper, she swished a dab behind each ear.

In her day, a lady catered to the man in her life. If Lucifer liked oud, she would give him oud.

Placing the vial in the pocket of her elastic-waist skirt because she didn't want to risk straining her back by reaching for the pack at her feet, she mixed in the oil before spreading the entirety over the candle with her fingers. Because she had forgotten a cloth, and napkins, too, it seemed, she wiped the residue on the underside hem of her ugly brown polyester skirt. Sad to say, it was the prettiest thing in her closet.

After withdrawing a book of matches from her pocket, she flipped open the cover with trembling fingers. Her breath stuttered and caught as failure washed through her at what lay revealed.

Only a single match remained. Last night, she had plucked the book from the cleaner's cart. She should have checked it was full. If the devil was in the details, she had probably just blown her chance at meeting him.

She took a deep breath, the deepest she could. No. No, this was going to work. Magic required belief and will. She had both, because the alternative was unthinkable. She refused to go out like Jamie Peterson. No way. No. Way.

With her heart pumping and her lungs wheezing, she ripped out the match. It tore just under the head. She swore softly. Even if she could get the cardboard to light, her fingers would burn.

Briefly, her eyes shuttered until she forced them open again. So what? Magic also required sacrifice. A little flesh wasn't such a great deal to lose. Plus, it wasn't as if there were oxygen carts lined up waiting to

explode if she caught fire, like there would be in her bedroom at Shady Grove.

When she struck the match, it burst into flame. Pain shot from her sensitive fingertips up her arm. She ignored the burn as she pushed the end to the candle wick. Forever passed as her flesh screamed, but finally the taper bloomed. Just in time, the entirety of the match fell to ash. Sticking her thumb and forefinger into her mouth, Verdetta tried to lave away the pain, without success.

It didn't matter. If she survived her encounter with Himself, the mean nurse at Shady Grove could patch her up later with ointment and bandages.

Clearing her throat, Verdetta flipped the codex to the page she had marked and withdrew the photocopy. To make it, she had been forced to sneak into the Shady Grove's management office to use the rumbling copier. No one on the staff had stopped her because, in another twist of fate, they had all gone to celebrate Simon Glover's ninetieth birthday in the dining hall. Simon's family owned Coripso International, a multi-tiered conglomerate with tentacles into all sorts of different pies and governments. In a guilt-assuaging move, the heirs had sent over a giant, gilded, cream fruit tart filled and topped with exotic delicacies, all for show, of course. Simon's family couldn't give a good fig about him, but they wanted to pretend they did until they were certain he couldn't change his will.

Verdetta chuckled as she smoothed the cheap paper. Little did the heirs know, Simon, all gummy five-foot-five-inches of his bent and broken fine self, had already signed over the entirety of his fortune to the sloe-eyed hussy who changed his bedpans and read him fables at night.

Withdrawing her readers from her pocket, Verdetta slipped them over her ears and squinted at the pen marks she had made beneath each symbol. The largest problem with Enochian seemed to be the variety of sounds each letter could indicate. If she recited a word incorrectly, would she summon a hellhound?

A sudden sense of unease rippled over her sagging flesh. She pushed it away.

No. She would succeed. No more doubts.

Clearing her throat, she began reading out loud. *"Samael, archangel of light, first star of the morrow, I bid thee. Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, King of Hell, Emperor of this orb, I summon thee. Being of light and*

shadow, I bid upon thee to assuage mine summoning. Samael, Lucifer, thou whom sear brighter than any travelling lamp, join to me. I offer mine corporal agent for thy pleasure. I offer mine corporal agent for thy pleasure. I offer mine corporal agent for thy pleasure, and I would to take mine own. ”

Removing her reading glasses, Verdetta stared at the blanket in front of her and waited.

Nothing happened.

She waited some more. Frowning, she reread her translation. Had she said the words correctly? Enochian had been translated into letters by John Dee in the fifteen-hundreds. She might have misinterpreted the text. Or maybe she had missed a letter? Or, mistranslated one of the symbols? Or, his name - *Sah-mah-el*, or *Shah-mah-el*? And where was the accent?

A long gusting sigh escaped her lips. Well, at least she had tried.

But disappointment rang in her creaking bones.



CHAPTER TWO

THE KING OF HELL PACED his suite. Just for something fun to do, he blew the roof off the palace. The explosion rocked the walls and foundation. Screams sounded, though he had first ascertained no one worked in the uppermost reaches to be caught within the wave of power. Hallways filled with the patter of scrambling feet to match the concerned cries.

Constrained. He was always and ever constrained. Sighing, he swirled his hand and replaced the building back to the way it had been.

And he was still bored.

When he arrived at the row of windows overlooking his famed garden, he stopped, closed his eyes, and inhaled the mix of scents seeping through the glass. Technically, he didn't need to breathe, much less use his sight to discern his surroundings, but the actions often comforted him in some inexplicable way. Maybe it was because he had spent so much of his existence incorporeal, the reminder of his flesh offered a certain solace and an explanation for his bad humor. Flesh could feel, and feeling... well. He wouldn't wish it on his worst enemy, though strangely he always seemed to want more of it.

From the doorway, the discordance of a cleared throat grated across to where he stood. Lucifer didn't need to turn to know who it was. He recognized the sound, having heard it often enough. It heralded more bad news. Again. Always.

"Your Majesty?"

Lucifer sighed and waved Gregor, his eldest retainer and the angel who had helped raise him, into the room. "A moment."

Opening his eyes, he stared into his garden. Seven circular paths flowed inward with labyrinthic juts at steadied intervals. He had designed the passage to lend him calm when his temper made him reckless. His gaze came to rest upon the fourth sweep where the bluemyrads bloomed. The flowers could be used to control demons, though he hadn't brewed a potion from them in thousands of years. His anger and will normally proved effective at controlling the greedy, rampaging buggers over whom he reigned, although lately it seemed the entire nation warred to escape his grasp.

Which meant, what? More useless power grabs by over-reaching lower beings who had no hope of winning against him? Something must be whispering in their ears, though archons didn't usually bother subverting demons. It was too much like taking candy from an infant. Where was the challenge? Still, the evil race must be behind the sudden rash of suicides-by-devil, because the constant spate of uprisings made progress against the archons more difficult. And endless.

Hell, he was bored. Too bad the bluemyrad petals couldn't cure malaise.

He stroked the edging of the enormous glass window as the thought he resisted worked its way free of his control. Maybe he needed to leave physical form and return to incorporeality. Maybe it was all the comfort that remained to him.

Because if he left duality and returned to the endless, returned to float and simply exist without time, space, or emotion cramping him, he would be free of both boredom and the fight. He could lose and not care, or at least, care less. Some glimmerings would remain. He would still be aware, but without the wherewithal to do any damn thing about the mess, chaos, and endless horror physicality provided. He could escape to where the archons and the war against them existed only at a distance.

But when he informed his father of his plans, as his conscience said he must, his pater would frown and storm, before reminding his youngest son of his sacred obligations. He would stop short of calling Lucifer a coward, but the insult would be implied. And his mother would cry. She would rend her garments and wail until he gave in. He had never been able to see her hurt. But his siblings would certainly cheer, most especially Michael, his eldest brother, the heir to Heaven's throne, and his arch-nemesis. Their sibling rivalry had burned through quite a few planets. Michael would be content to see the back of him.

Even so, some things were more important than his family's reactions. He was either the second, third, or fourth most powerful creature in existence, depending upon whom one asked, and he was bored down to his toes. His tedium imperiled all Creation, because nothing brought him closer to stupidity. Better to simply disappear and confine his power back to the void. Humans believed he controlled all evil, and it was a good tale he strongly encouraged, though it was false and he wouldn't repeat it

himself because of its lack of truth. But reckless – ah, he couldn't deny the charge.

Gregor cleared his throat once more. "Um, Your Majesty?"

Lucifer rotated to face the elderly angel. His heart clenched at the sight. Lately, Gregor's flesh crept ever-downward. His blue eyes faded a little more each day. Hunched, with a great scar running across his face earned by following Lucifer into The Fall, he looked more dead than alive. His skin had grown almost translucent with age. Even his breath smelled like damp paper rotting on the ground. His time in the physical neared its end, and when he left to be recycled into the universe, there would be no one left to care for the lonely, bored, king of Hell.

Immortal was a term celestials threw around, but angels lived far fewer years than archangels, and even archangels eventually died. He assumed. Though his own lifespan foretold millions, if not billions, or even trillions, of above-shell years, he too would expire. Everything succumbed to inertia. Everything physical, anyway. A lowly angel like Gregor expected less time.

Still. It hurt.

"Majesty." Gregor bowed his neck once more. Lucifer waited to see if the spindly stem would crack under the weight of his retainer's head, but Gregor managed to straighten. "I thought you should know. The *Liber Fornicationis*...

"Remind me."

Gregor cleared his throat. "Your book of fornication, Your Majesty." He bobbed his head again.

"Yes, I can still comprehend a few languages, even in my dotage. And how many times have I told you, it is unnecessary to bow when we're in private?"

"Of course, Your Majesty." Gregor bobbed his head again. "You've mentioned it millions of times. But the book..."

"The one I penned for the coven in Bath, yes."

"Over five hundred years ago, Majesty. You deemed intercourse with the witches so gratifying, you gifted them with a codex written in your own hand as a means of making contact for continued, er... fuckery."

"I envisioned fucking their daughters as well, possibly their granddaughters, but yes." Lucifer huffed at the memory. Good times. He had pleased his way through the choicest morsels of sixteenth century

England. And afterward – ah, afterward, he had enjoyed his time tutoring the young Elizabeth in the amatory arts. When he had left her bed for a second romp through the country, she had, in a fit of pique and jealousy, ordered his witches burned. One had to admire her single-minded pursuit of her claims upon him, even if he didn't admire her for her sins.

"I thought the book had been destroyed?"

"So we all believed, Your Majesty. If you recall, the last witch burned, Samantha Crawling, did not die alone. Elizabeth consigned her entire library to the flames."

"A redhead's jealousy. Their vengeance is almost always worthy of a Shakespearean play, which is only one of the reasons I favor them."

But his humor died at the reminder of Samantha's destruction. She had been a pretty lass, possessed of a gentle nature. She hadn't deserved her painful ending, so he had ordered John Dee to save her from the pyre. Instead, the alchemist, to whom he had taught many of the universe's secrets, watched from the front row as the lithe blonde's flesh crisped along with all the tools of her craft.

Had Dee escaped with the codex? The little lordling was still out there, somewhere, warded against him and under Gabriel's protection in return for a favor rendered to his brother. Otherwise, he would have destroyed the rat by now... had he remembered the vermin's existence, which he hadn't.

"Where was the book discovered?" Lucifer crossed to the wine bar at the far corner of the room. The vines in Hell grew particularly sweet grapes, and he was in the mood for something heady, something amusing. Something he didn't control.

Fuck, he was bored!

"A little village in New Jersey, of all places. I felt your energy twinkle through the ethers and immediately sent Zariel to investigate. He watched an old woman exit a bookstore. She carried a brown leather codex of correct size bearing a demon signature along with yours."

"When?"

Gregor shuffled and flinched. "A few days ago," he replied under his breath.

"A few days?" Lucifer raised his brow and speared Gregor on his stare.

Gregor bobbed again. "As you will recall, Your Majesty, you have been busy with court. The matter with the leonids..."

Lucifer rolled his eyes. “There’s always trouble of some kind requiring my intervention. It doesn’t excuse a dereliction of duty, Gregor. Did you imagine I wouldn’t care that a book I wrote managed an astonishing resurrection after nearly five hundred years?”

His retainer swallowed. “No, Your Majesty. I simply wished to be certain before troubling you with the information. While it is true I believed the blip to arise from the *Fornicationis*, as your other two works remain under surveillance, hidden from the world until the time is right... well.” He circled his hand, as if explanation enough.

It was. Lucifer had a temper, and no one wished to be the messenger bearing uncertain ill tidings, not even the old angel.

He sipped the delicate wine with its complex notes. Brimstone, yes, but also cherry, chocolate, and a delightful sweep of orange. Perfection. If the palace hadn’t stocked sufficient barrels, Gregor would have to see to it.

He considered his codex. “How ancient is the bookstore in question?”

“No more than fifty above-shell years, Majesty. Certainly not long enough for the book to have remained hidden on some dusty, ensorcelled shelf since the witch’s burning. But if it had been moved from a prior location, I would have sensed it.” He shrugged. “It’s a bit of a mystery.”

Anointed with Lucifer’s essence, penned by his own hand, the *Fornicationis* had been laid upon old vellum and inscribed with demon blood as ink. Salvice Struthers, the coven’s head witch, had provided him with the scraped skin, but at his insistence, she had left a student’s funny remark in the margin of the sex-summoning spell so as to make Pattice Connors laugh when next she sought to contact him. Pattice had been possessed of a wickedly ubiquitous kind of appreciation for the odd, along with delectable breasts. And to make certain the necessary sacrifice was made to set the spell over his words, he had dipped the sharp-edged plume deep into Belarius Junior’s mangled torso so as to cause Belarius Senior the maximum amount of agony.

Who needed bluemyrad flowers to control rampaging demons set on overtaking his throne? The screams of the two Belarius’s still echoed down the centuries.

If the codex had survived Samantha’s pyre, he should have known about it. The only way it could have escaped his attention was if someone had warded it against him at the witch’s death. Someone like Dee, probably. Or his interfering brother. Any of his brothers, really, even the

ones he almost liked. Though, if warded, why had the protective magicks now failed?

A mystery to hold him for a span of hours. Beggers couldn't be choosers.

"Send some of the Fallen to find John Dee. If you can't find him, search out Gabriel and tell him I'd like a word." Lucifer turned to examine his garden once more. "I've a few matters to discuss..."

But he didn't finish. A commotion in the hallway drew his attention.

His cousin, Beliel, stepped to the door frame and bowed low from the waist. "Your Majesty."

"Enter." Lucifer surveilled the legion following in Bel's footsteps. Between their ranks, a delicate form slumped and dragged. "What's this?"

"We found the succubus in your garden, Majesty. She carried a forbidden bloom plucked from your sacred earth." Bel stepped close to Lucifer and handed him a crushed blue flower reminiscent of a lily. In a lower voice, he added, "The succubus, Gertha, is the mistress of the demon, Balthataro. Clan Bermisis. We surmise he sent her to capture the bloom."

"Is that so?" Lucifer strode to where the captive hung limp, held aloft by strong Fallen arms.

That she was aware of him showed when she flinched from his touch. He tugged her long golden hair back, exposing her throat. Green eyes opened, soft as the underfur of his bluemyrad flower. Terror reflected within them.

"I see." He smiled. The succubus flinched. "You no doubt wished to aid your lover in taking my throne. Perhaps he thought to control me with the flower, poor sap. And you - do you love him, this...?" He glanced over his shoulder.

"Balthataro, my liege." Beliel bobbed his head.

"Him, yes." He returned his attention to the shrinking demon. "Tell me the plan, girl. I have no appetite for torture today. The punishment for trespass is death. I am willing to overlook your treachery and make your ending quick." Not that it would matter much. When demons died, they went to the Punishing, but most preferred to go there in spirit rather than in physical body. Apparently, the pain was somewhat softened by lack of original skin and bones.

But instead of responding with words, she spat at him. Slowly, he wiped the spittle from his robe. Quicker than a snake, he grabbed the neckline of her silk gown and ripped it to the waist. As she cried out and attempted to back away, he savagely twisted her nipple. She screamed, but he didn't release her.

"You trespassed in my garden, succubus. My sacrosanct space." He brought his face close to hers, daring her to spit at him again. But she wouldn't. Her momentary bravado had been tempered by pain. "You stole my sacred flower. I wished to grant you a swift death, but in spurning my leniency you have earned your punishment. I sentence you to the Punishing. The torment I inflict upon you at this moment will prove a holiday compared to the agony you will suffer."

"P-please," she begged. "Please!" Tears streamed from her soft green eyes as she tried to escape his grip. "I'm sorry, Majesty. I... I can pleasure you. I'll do anything. Anything you desire."

A ragged laugh escaped him. "So will every entity in Hell and above-shell. I'm not so desperate I require solace from a traitor." He released her and stepped away, back to his window so he could gaze upon the one thing that gave him peace. "To the Punishing, Bel. Six days, at the end of which she will be given the option of repenting. I'll have her testimony, her apology, and her life, or the Punishing will crisp her flesh until the end of days. As for Balthataro – eradicate the clan's adults. Farm out the children to be raised by other clans and used in servitude. And send him to join his beloved in her torment. In flesh."

The succubus screamed and tried to writhe from the hands gripping her, but he waved his troops away. His orders would be carried out, and whatever uprising Balthataro had planned would be put to rest. Not that it would have worked. Archangels were invulnerable to almost everything, though he did have a responsibility to instill as much tranquility as possible below shell.

Gregor approached him once more. In a low voice, he hissed his name. "Samael."

Lucifer rounded on him, his hand raised, but when Gregor flinched, shame filled him, hot and sharp. He lowered his arm slowly. "I only meant to point you out of the room, Gregor. You must know I would never strike you, no matter how distressed or enraged I were to become?"

Or had his ennui become so evident that even his closest allies squirmed with the very fear he had been born to help eliminate?

“Pardon, Majesty.” His retainer bobbed before he met Lucifer’s gaze. “I was merely taken by surprise with the motion, lad. My eyes fail me, and I startle too easily. It is yet another unpalatable symptom of age.” He drew in a deep breath. “As for failing...”

“No. I don’t wish to speak of it.” Lucifer returned his gaze to the garden whose peace had been marred by the trespassing succubus. Balthataro’s whore. She would suffer the ultimate price for her intrusion on his holy place. Did she imagine she loved the treacherous demon enough to risk everything for his whims? Whether in days or years, she would understand her delusion. Love hurt. All of it. Even the small affection of which he was capable. “You have many years yet, my friend.”

Gregor squeezed his arm. His grasp was weaker than Lucifer liked. “Samael, you must accept my destiny as I have. Even you will one day fade back to energy.”

Lucifer turned his head quickly and stepped back to the bar, afraid what the angel might see with his rheumy eyes. He poured another glass of wine and held it out to his retainer.

Gregor shook his head and smiled a shaky grin. “No, thank you, Majesty. As for the rash of treachery of recent months, have you considered...”

A sudden chime rent the air. Lucifer felt a physical tug on his cock.

No. It couldn’t be.

“Hold the thought, Gregor. Either Dee has decided to take me up on my amatory offer after five hundred years and is summoning me for a grand fuck-a-thon, or someone has translated the Enochian of the *Liber Fornicationis* and thinks it some sort of farce. Or...” He smiled. “Someone is very brave. I can’t wait to see which. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Pursing his lips, he revolved through the ethers, glad for any escape from the heartache Gregor presented.

Above-shell, in a flowered glen, he reached through his smoke and light display and grabbed the candle used to summon him. An old woman in terrible clothes squinted across several feet. Ignoring her, he sent his senses around the green. Nothing living pinged other than some squirrels, deer, and tiny creatures that burrowed in the ground.

His gaze latched once again onto the elderly female, slipping over her baggy pink tee-shirt and brown polyester skirt, taking in the white sneakers on her feet, and the support hose she wore beneath the terrible fabric. He regarded her gray hair set in a typical just-brushing-the-ears old-lady style of pressed curls. She looked to be in her dwindling years, too long of face with waterfall jowls, and too much like Gregor.

His heart clenched as he wrapped his hands behind his back and surveilled her. The weight of emotion crushed him as she reminded him of his incipient loss.



CHAPTER THREE

DESPAIR, FOGGY AND sharp, washed through Verdetta as the empty space remained empty. Though maybe at her age she should have been more pragmatic, she had fallen for the inchoate magic of the text, seeing in the strange writing a last chance to do the unexpected and unthinkable. Part of her had really believed, but only because she wanted to.

She squinted at the page until a hot wind ruffled the small hairs on her arms. Like a tempest on the edge of the ocean, it brought with it the strange brine of the unfathomable deep along with a wallowing of smoke. Looking up, she cried out at the formation taking shape and grabbed for her walker. The awkwardly blanced tray toppled. Only luck let her catch the candle before it tumbled to the ground with the rest of the ingredients and the sacred codex.

The swirl of shadow and flashing lights deepened. The wind kicked up, notching into a full gale. It blew her hair straight back from her face and wrapped her skirt so her private parts and bulbuous thighs were outlined for anyone to see. Caught between an instinctive modesty and guarding the flame, her dilemma was solved when the candle ripped from her hand and flew toward the pyrotechnics. It spiraled up, up, up - until it settled back down onto the palm extended from the mass of swirling energy.

When the shadows faded, sucked back into nothingness in an instant, a tall, gorgeous hunk of well-muscle maleness remained. Dressed in a crimson robe embroidered with gold dragons and matching silk lounging pants, he stood with legs apart, chiseled and angled from his cheekbones to his naked toes. Excoriating blue eyes lasered down to her core and out again before he moved his study around the glen. His lids fell as he tipped up his chin, giving the impression he was sensing his surroundings.

But when he opened his eyes, he tilted his head sideways and a tiny furrow appeared on his brow. He again searched the clearing and the forest beyond. "This has the feel of one of Gabriel's jokes. He deludes himself into thinking he understands humor." He examined her again, starting at the tip of her head and working his way down, millimeter by millimeter. Goosebumps danced upon her flesh, everywhere his gaze passed. "Or perhaps Uriel thinks to send some convoluted message?"

Her mouth gaped as if trying to draw the flies her mother had warned her open mouths drew. No words exited.

“I see.” He searched the clearing again, his face falling into repose. Despite his reserve, he stood like a warrior or a conquering king, legs at the width of his shoulders, back rigidly straight. It seemed even the ground bowed before him. The glen and forests had fallen silent with his appearance. The animals must sense the unnatural predator in their midst.

Every fiber of her being trembled.

Something shifted – not his stance, but some muscle so it seemed he would rotate back into nothing. Like a magnet, he pulled his strange, terrible energy back into himself. In the hollow that remained, despite her terror, a gutted suggestion of absence swarmed.

She would lose him in a second, candle or no. Before he could leave, she croaked a word. “Wait.”

His snapping blue eyes twisted toward hers. An atavistic shiver ran down her limbs as he focused his attention. Ignoring the way every cell in her body shouted danger, she straightened as much as she could and gripped the wobbling walker like the lifeline it was.

And he hadn’t even attacked her yet. She tried to draw in a breath.

Never mind. “I... um, I summoned you, er... Lucifer?”

He ignored the question and lifted his chin higher so he surveilled her down his perfectly shaped, elegant nose. “Where is John Dee?” His voice rang with power. Each syllable bore a strange articulation. Each sound contained a warning.

“John D...” Her palms grew slippery with flop sweat. If she tried to wipe them on her skirt, she would unbalance and fall. Sprawled on the ground like a gaping whale, she wouldn’t even be able to hobble off when he shot her with a fireball, or whatever weapon he used to kill those who disturbed him. Lord, he was beautiful.

“John Dee. Or one of my brothers.” His brows drew together. “Are you a witch? I sense no connection to magic within you.” He tilted his head, appearing momentarily confused. “Though something resonates.”

“Right. No. I mean, yes.” She gathered her thoughts as best she was able. She couldn’t lose him now. “Er, um – well, I’m not a witch. And, um, if by ‘John Dee,’ you mean the person who translated the Enochian alphabet I used to figure out what the book said, I- well, I think he must be dead. I’m sorry.” Though she had no idea why she apologized for a passing

that must have occurred centuries earlier. Habbit, maybe. She unclenched her pointer finger from the walked and stretched it toward the blanket edge some feet away where the codex lay, but she didn't take her gaze from him. She couldn't. "The alphabet was on the computer, but I have a copy in the book if you'd like to see it."

Without his so much as glancing toward it, the codex flew into his other palm, the one not holding the candle. He looked at the cover and frowned. "I should never have taught that preening cock the first tongue. You used the *Liber Loagaeth*?"

She blinked. The words, whatever they were, took on an incomprehensibility in the trilling acrobatics of his tongue.

He rolled his eyes and slowed his words. "The *Book of Speech from God*. The language was never meant for common parlance." He tossed the book back toward where it originally lay. It hovered in the air for a moment before gently sinking. "How did Dee transfer the codex to you? And why?"

The fixed stagnation of the clearing clawed against her skin as she sought for something to say. Earlier, before his arrival, frogs had croaked, the creek had babbled, birds had chirped, and even the insects had hummed. Now, it appeared the two of them existed in a vacuum, so even the distant sounds of traffic from the street beyond Shady Grove didn't penetrate the stillness.

She couldn't find the words. There were none. What had she done? What would he do?

"Speak." The low honeyed command carried a wave of power.

Despite her frozen state, she discovered she could swallow. And talk. "I... um... well. N-no one gave me the book. I, um... found it. In a used bookstore. It was lodged behind a book on gardening, and from the moment I put my hands on it, I became... obsessed. Well not obsessed, but..." Her voice trailed off under his stern regard. His eyes had narrowed as he listened to her stumbling, bumbling explanation. "I paid fifty cents for it."

Slowly, at the speed of an ice glacier moving around the globe, he lifted an eyebrow. Just one.

"I haggled the clerk down from a dollar. I'm, well... I'm pretty good at bargaining."

“And you seek to bargain with *me*?” The contempt in his voice slipped around and twirled up her body like a snake. An invisible, potent snake.

She swallowed again. “No. Can you – um, can you return the sounds? I can’t quite – breathe. The atmosphere...”

Some of the tension eased from his expression, and with it, the draped quietude of the glen. He closed his eyes, and the wash of impending violence he carried with him retreated. When he opened his long lashes again, a small smile twisted his beautiful, plush lips. “To think, my words are worth less than a dollar. It almost doesn’t pay the bills.” He again looked her up and down. “You summoned me of your own accord?”

He must have noted her crepey skin, dangling with fat, and her thick middle, and even the way her breasts created just another roll of shelving over her belly. She lifted her chin. “I did.”

With his hands latched behind his back, the candle still lit, he began to walk in a circle around the picnic blanket, glancing at it before continuing his examination of her. “You?”

She nodded. It was all she could do as he drew near. Increased power rolled from him in waves. A dark, intense forcefield unlike anything she had ever experienced swept over her skin, swamping her so her heart stalled along with her breath. Even her blood refused to pump. Thump, crash. Thump, crash. It was like trying to live inside a bolt of lightning, all undiluted promise and peril, but the energy – the energy cut through her veins and ripped her apart so she thought she would be exploded into a million tiny particle.

Stroke or heart attack. She didn’t know which, only knew she was going down. Her body jerked and spasmed as it tried its best to survive. The walker slipped and the floor dropped out from beneath her feet, but as she tumbled to the earth, he pointed. A chair materialized, meeting her as she gently sank. Her fingers clutched at the carved arms in an attempt to gain some small purchase. Distantly, as she wheezed, she noted the gilded ornate wood and the thick velvet cushion spread under her bottom. Pretty.

He held up a finger and she could breathe again. Her heart pumped as if there had never been any question it would do otherwise. Her gaze rivetted upon him, waiting for the next blow.

He waited, too. Serene. Indefatigable. Handsome as sin with a draw no one could resist, even if death should come at its end.

As deeply as she could with her withered lungs, she inhaled, counted to five, and tried again. Right. Lucifer. The terror spiking in her blood accorded with all reports of meeting him. According to some, he was supposed to be the god of this world, as well as the source of all evil.

He was also supposed to be the god of love, and it wasn't a difficult thing to believe. Even without the power, his perfection, his beauty, caught her in the gut. Instead of shrinking away from him, her body leaned toward where he stood.

"The chair is from my palace. The dining room. I think they're a bit too ornate, but the demons appreciate them. Are you well?"

She stroked the arms again, the fine carving undulating like water beneath her fingers. "Yes. Thank you for the seat. I'm afraid my legs aren't what they once were."

"Hmm." He passed on behind her, his perusal and his nearness dragging frissons of disquiet along her arms. When he paused just behind her shoulder and touched the nape of her neck, fire bloomed and shimmered down her body, but it got lost before it reached the critical spot between her legs.

Typical. Her body was ever-ready to betray her.

He walked on until he came to the patch of grass at which he had arrived. Turning to face her, he nodded his chin towards the stacked plastic containers. "Lunch?"

Her hands fluttered. "I thought you might enjoy a bite, before..."

"Ah, yes. *Before*." For a brief moment, he rotate his head away as if to hide the way his lips twisted upward. When he turned back, he gestured toward the book. "You are aware the spell was a sex-summoning?"

Verdetta drew herself up as far as she could. "I'm not stupid. Of course I know it's a sex-summoning."

He nodded, but his lips puckered, probably because he wanted to laugh but valued courtesy.

With a shaky breath that didn't quite inflate her lungs, she patted her hair back into place before wrapping her hands together on her lap. "Well. Thank you for coming, er – should I call you 'Lucifer' or...?"

He took a step closer, mad energy swirling around him and catching her up again so her chest crushed under the weight of an anvil. "Most people call me 'Majesty.'"

His voice, a rumble of dark, well-articulated honey, kissed over her skin. Even in her estrogen-deprived state, her body quaked. Or maybe it was just how he looked: dark hair swept back, a single wave touching his forehead; electric blue eyes; long of limb and muscled as if made of velvet covered steel, his torso a perfect V-shape. Her gaze dropped down to the revealed swathe of abdomen above his low-hung silk pants, just visible in the gape of the red silk robe. His swarthy skin revealed far more than a six-pack. Was a twenty-pack possible?

Swallowing, Verdetta focused on his perfect face once more. “Majesty. Sounds a little formal, considering the nature of our engagement.”

His blue eyes widened briefly before he burst out laughing. “Ah, yes. Well then, I suppose ‘Lucifer,’ will do.” He sobered, his voice soft. “About the picnic...”

Verdetta swiveled her head to surveille the plastic containers before she remembered she should keep her attention focused upon him. Sure enough, when she rotated back, he stood too close, his feet on either side of her own. Just a bit above eye level, his silk lounging pants bulged with an impressive hard roll of manhood. Her pulse quickened at the implied threat – or gift. The fire and ice racing through her veins made it difficult to decide which. Ignoring the sensations, she craned back her neck to look into his eyes, but a tiny whimper whispered past her lips before she could swallow it.

He watched her steadily, unblinking, his expression tight.

Because he wanted to scare her into running away? Her back straightened further, straighter than it had managed in years. He didn’t know her if he thought he could threaten her with his proximity. What was the worst that could happen? Rape? Death?

Her tongue clicked against her teeth as she stared up his long, hard body. She had watched friend after friend succumb to ignominious deaths in silent, antiseptic rooms filled with beeping machines and a lack of loved ones. It didn’t matter how successful or educated or beautiful they had been during their prime, they ended the same, but she, little old Verdetta Maille, who hadn’t stepped a foot wrong since her marriage, refused to go out the same way.

No, sir. Bring it on, Devil-man.

Starch arched her toward him rather than away so her lips drew perilously close to the base of the extended thick ridge. “Personal space,

young man. Step back.” She infused her voice with all the power an old woman had, which really only consisted of a sort of grouchy nagging.

This time he swallowed his laughter, though humor rippled across his blue eyes. “Of course. Forgive me for thinking a woman summoning me with a sex spell might enjoy a lack of *personal space*.”

It might be her imagination, but she thought his abbreviated nod might signal approval of her spunk. He took a single step back and seemed to remember he still carried the fat black candle. He waved it into the air.

As she watched it disappear, disappointment twisted in her belly. Now he could disappear as well, any time he wished.

His brow raised. “Have I kicked your favorite puppy?”

She swallowed again, and gestured to the air where the taper had vanished. “No. It’s just the candle.”

“Did it possess sentimental value?”

She sighed. “No. It was simply the fattest one I could find. I had hoped to keep you long enough... well.” She shrugged. “I thought you might require a bit of prepping for the job.”

Laughter twinkled across his face once more, but his expression gentled. “Ah, Verdetta Maille. Don’t believe everything you read on the internet. The candle helped smooth the summoning to me on smoke. It does not control me.” He used the name she hadn’t given him, thereby letting her know some of what he was capable.

“You can read my mind?”

“Yes. And no. Tell me, Verdetta, what is it you wish from me? And...” He sniffed, a different small glow entering his incredible blue eyes. “Please tell me I smell fried chicken?”

With a small nod, she tried a wavery smile of her own. “You do. There’s a place in town. *Irving’s*. They make chicken like my mother used to, in a pan on the stove, with just a thin coating of flour and egg, not like the heavy breading you get at the supermarket these days.” She pushed to her feet, wobbled, and gripped the chair arms so she wouldn’t fall.

But he was already there, supporting her, his touch on her elbow sending flame along her skin. Compelled to test his unearthly beauty, she reached up and ran her fingers along his jaw. Unmoving, unbreathing, he allowed her to touch him, but she sensed how he coiled, ready to strike.

What must it be like, to always stand ready to commit violence?

She dropped her hand, but exultation lifted her higher. Whatever happened, even if he killed her now, she had done it. She had summoned him, the gorgeous, deadly archangel. She couldn't have dreamed his physical perfection, and wouldn't have dared imagined his small acts of kindness, or the twist of humor he revealed at turns. Though her skin tingled and her soul caved in reaction to his otherness, and though she couldn't help but be aware he might turn on her at any moment, he also seemed... strangely normal. He could be one of her son's polite young friends, the one all the girls in the office drooled over, come for cake and coffee as many of them had while she still lived in her sprawling Victorian.

Except, she had never wanted to have sex with any of her son's friends. But this entity... *oof!* Even her reluctant hormones wanted to jump to attention. If they managed, could she somehow beguile him? But if the candle didn't hold him...

What would?



CHAPTER FOUR

“DID YOU COME BECAUSE of the spell? I mean, did I compel you?” she asked.

Menace swirled up from his skin along with a whirlwind of shadow, but his voice remained calm and even. “No one compels me, Verdetta Maille.” The terrifying energy retreated as quickly as it had arisen. “But I felt the spell and decided to investigate.”

She swallowed against the raging lightning flying from all directions of where he gripped her arm. It zinged closer to her core than anything had since before she had married. Extending her neck back, she looked up his long length. Lord, he was beautiful. He took her breath. “I’m glad you did, and I’m equally glad it was your decision. I don’t generally like forcing people to do things.”

“I find it saves time.” His tone was dry. A trace of laughter lay below the surface.

She cleared her throat. “Um, well, I thought you might enjoy a spot of lunch and a little chat? I’m told I’m an excellent conversationalist, if you’re interested?”

Another twinkle lit his incredible eyes. “You had me at ‘lunch.’” He bobbed his head and gestured she should precede him, his manner as courtly as if she were a queen and he the retainer. But not being completely stupid, she hesitated.

He arched toward her, smiling again as he whispered in her ear, his breath a whirl of hot smoke. “If I aimed to harm you, Verdetta Maille, I could do so just as easily from across the universe as behind you.” He drew back, his expression sending frissons of fear down her spine.

Heat flushed her cheek. “Fine, but hands off my ass.” She recouped as much pride as she could while he choked with laughter, and picked her way to the center of the blanket without her walker.

But when she staggered over a tiny stone, he steadied her by once again grabbing her elbow. A sharp, aching desire sped through her but still failed to land. It was the problem with age. Every once in a while, something moved in her blood, but it short-circuited before it could perch and flower. Heat rose, but snuffed out before it could flame.

“Thank you, Lucifer.”

He clicked his tongue and settled her onto the blanket, taking her poundage as if she weighed no more than a feather so she accordion-folded down without any of the usual aches and stiffness she had learned to expect.

Defter than any human could have managed, he sank beside her, collapsing his legs under him in one sure motion. With a wave of his hand, lids clicked off the plastic storage containers, the only kind of boxes she could get her hands on at Shady Grove. With another wave, he produced fine porcelain plates, linen napkins, and what appeared to be ornate, sculpted sterling flatware.

“If you don’t mind. I abhor paper platters and plastic utensils.” With another twist of his finger, two crystal flutes appeared in his hand, a soft golden liquid effervescing within. Handing her one, he glanced at it and a slice of strawberry floated upon the brew. “My favorite sparkling wine from my vineyards in Syria. It’s a bit sweet at first, but manages a remarkably dry finish. I credit the use of Armenian apples during the fermentation process.”

He waited. He waited in such stillness, she remembered all over again that he wasn’t human and she should be afraid. But he was also proving to be a gentleman, and somehow his courtesy settled the larger part of her nerves.

Grasping the glass he offered, she tipped it to her lips. As the chilled liquid flowed over her tongue and down her throat, she closed her eyes to savor the bubbles. “Oh,” she breathed. Opening her eyes, she found he still watched, unmoving. “This is amazing.”

If she didn’t know better, which she really didn’t, she would say he looked relieved. “I’m happy to please.”

“Really?”

He glanced at her from beneath his long, dark lashes. “Don’t believe everything you’ve heard of me, Verdetta. I’d prefer to please when the situation allows.” But as he glanced back at his glass, something in his voice snagged at her heart.

“So far, you’re nothing like what rumors paint you as being,” she rushed to assure him.

He smiled again. “I can be.”

She shook her head. “I’m a pretty good judge of character, though I suppose you’re so powerful you might hide your evilness from someone

like me.” She smoothed her skirt and peeked up at him. “Yet, I’ve found that civility and kindness don’t usually go hand-in-hand with bad intentions.”

He huffed. “You’ve obviously lived a sheltered life.”

Since he was correct, she didn’t argue. Instead, she took another sip of the delicious wine to block her expression, though from the heat in her cheeks, she must be blushing like a schoolgirl.

“I’m glad you haven’t met up with true evil, Verdetta Maille. It makes sharing a repast with you sweeter.” He tipped his glass and the food in the containers separated onto the two plates and landed between them. Fried chicken with thin skin so crispy, it crackled when touched. Potato salad made the way her mother used to make it, with oil and mustard rather than mayonnaise. Shucked corn creamy with butter and salt, buttermilk biscuits, and her own famous zucchini casserole with fried onions competed for space on the porcelain.

“Did you imagine I starved below shell?” He left his glass dangling in mid-air while he picked up his fork. Gravity forgot to be a problem. Forking corn into his mouth, he managed to look graceful and beautiful while performing the pedestrian task. Briefly, his blue eyes shuttered as a look of pleasure graced his incomparably beautiful face. “Delicious. You couldn’t have known, but buttered, salted corn is one of my favorite foods in this world.”

Long lashes blinked open to spear Verdetta on his blue lasers once more. Since it wouldn’t do to sit there gaping at him like some ninny, she picked up her piece of chicken and began pulling it apart. Once more, he studied her.

“Is it polite to stare where you’re from?” she asked before ripping off a bite and shoving it into her mouth.

Once again, his lips pursed as if he tried to avoid laughing. “No. My apologies.” He returned to his food, sampling the items on his plate.

A contented silence fell between them. Verdetta relaxed, stiffened, and relaxed again. She took a sip of the delicious wine as her head swam. “Just to be clear, you’re not planning to destroy me while we eat, are you?”

He shrugged. “I had planned to wait for dessert, but if you like...?”

She knew he was joking by the way his eyes twinkled. A warm feeling welled within her. Somehow, she had relaxed him. When he had first

appeared, he had been all might and majesty, but now he seemed calmer. Approachable.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer you refrain... forever?”

“I suppose I might. Given the quality of your luncheon offering, I would hate to rid the world of the generous soul responsible for such a meal.” He took a sip from his glass and eyed her over the rim.

She spread her arms in a fake bow, the best she could manage while seated. “Your appreciation and restraint are noted. Try the zucchini.”

He did, making all the complimentary noises she expected to hear from a polite young man.

They ate for a bit before he struck like the snake to which he was sometimes likened. “What did you hope to gain by summoning me, Verdetta? Other than sex?” His gaze was so steady, it wouldn’t have bounced in a storm. “Riches? Youth? Power? Or, someone back from the dead?”

“I...” Carefully, she placed her fork upon the plate and pushed it from her. The oppressive atmosphere settled around her again. It urged her to tread softly. She considered her response. “I suppose it’s a fair question, but the truth is, I wanted none of what you mention. I hadn’t even thought about any of it as a possibility. Although- you can raise the dead?” For a moment, her heart blipped with possibility. Could he bring back her daughter?

“I would not.”

Which meant, he could, but he shouldn’t, so wouldn’t.

She sighed, her heart steadying again. “I suppose that’s good, because I might have been tempted to ask, now you’ve mentioned it.” She toyed with the stem of her glass and met his gaze. “The truth is, I summoned you because I wanted an adventure. I didn’t think of gaining anything tangible from you other than sex, which at the very least seemed a two-way street. In my day, the sort of grasping you’re implying was frowned upon, though I suppose the world has turned so it now appears far too acceptable.”

He took another sip from his glass, as if to put her at ease, but he watched her above the rim.

She rubbed her fingers along the scratchy blanket. Its cheap quality must offend him. “To be honest, there’s little left in this world that I want. I’m ready to leave it. Mostly.”

Some of the tight suspicion left his eyes. “Mostly. What remains?”

Once more, she considered his question. It deserved an honest answer. "I suppose, other than wanting to balance my horrifyingly sane existence by doing something crazy like summoning you for sex, I wouldn't mind taking a peek behind the curtain before I exit stage left." She paused. "Would you tell me about yourself, Lucifer? Or would you prefer to remain mysterious?"

His eyes shot through her as he waited. His quietude assaulted with incipient potential. "What would you like to know?"

She shrugged. "Anything, really. How you see yourself, maybe? Or your views on good versus evil? I admit, I'm curious about all those rules I followed and whether I've wasted my life by always trying to do the right thing." The fact of her death didn't war against her. She had long since accepted it. But the nature of how she had lived still bothered her. Regrets- she had too many of them. "I've read everything about you I could find these past couple days, but you don't seem like any of your descriptions." She leaned forward, gripping her glass. "There's a certain minister. Born-again type. An exorcist."

Not a muscle moved in his face. "Yes. He's profiting from his tales of my intercession. He doesn't place me in a favorable light, does he?"

"No. But he's biased. He described two encounters with you. He believes you tried to tempt him from his calling. But..." She hesitated. "But I think he's wrong about your motives," she said on a rush. "I thought so even before I met you."

His gaze slipped past her shoulder and traveled around the glen once more. He seemed to be listening for more than her. "Did you?"

"Yes. Did you meet with him?"

He stilled again. "I did. But if not to tempt him into evil, what motives do you ascribe to me?"

"I think you tried to warn him away from temptation. I find it difficult to believe an entity older than dirt, if you'll excuse the expression, could be so... so ham-fisted and stupid as to believe offering him drugs only moments after he took a vow of sobriety, or menacing him away from some high-falutin nightclub, would tempt him into more of the same dangerous behavior."

"Assuming I'm not ham-fisted or stupid is kind of you." He held back a smile.

She shrugged. “Not kind. Logical. If I’m right, you used your presence to instill fear. You used the fact of you like a baseball bat upside his head, maybe one of Mr. Marcedi’s autographed ones, for all I know. He has five or six. Mr. Marcedi lives at Shady Grove, but on the second floor. I, um, borrowed the night-blooming jasmine for the spell from him.”

Laughter twisted his beautiful lips. “*Stole*, I believe you mean.”

“Why quibble over semantics?” But heat flushed her cheeks.

“Because the world lives within definitions.” He raised his glass and took a sip before continuing. “Thank you, Verdetta, for considering me capable of greater subtlety. I assure you, I am. I am also capable of beating a man over the head to attain my ends, and ripping his organs from him while he yet lives. If you want the truth of me, you must accept all of it.”

She took another deep breath, but it failed to expand her lungs. It was too easy to imagine him in a rage. Power clung to him with grappled fingers. “Maybe, but I also think *the truth* is different from its parts. Like the whole enchilada is different from the beans, lettuce, etcetera.”

He carelessly twirled the stem through his fingers. The small smile still played upon his lush lips.

“I’ve lived a long life, too, Lucifer – at least, for a human. I’ve watched corruption on every front, and I’ve watched the mediocre rise to power. I’ve seen evil. It’s... stupid. It’s greedy, and grasping, and often thoughtless. It lives in fear.”

He winced as if she had struck him. “Oh, Verdetta Maille. You do delight.”

She leaned forward, needing to know. “If you’re afraid of anything I can’t sense it. Is there anyone who could hurt you?”

His fingers twirled faster, twisting the glass like a baton. Somehow, the wine remained within the cup. “Physically, my parents could kill me, mostly because I would never strike back, despite the common misperception of our relationship. But they would never harm me. Two of my brothers believe themselves stronger than I am, though they would live to regret a direct attack. Or not live.” He smiled again, and this time it sparkled across his lethal blue eyes. “What I lack in obscene, boulder-like muscles, I make up for in wiliness.”

Verdetta nodded as his confidence slithered over her skin. “Exactly. You’re not afraid. How can evil live without fear? I don’t think it can.”

He returned the glass to hover in the air and reached out to stroke her cheek with his finger. Fire rushed through her. “You are prescient and kind, Verdetta Maille. I appreciate both qualities. And even though you are correct on the nature of evil, the truth of me is not so easily discernable. Are you certain you wish to learn it?”

She nodded without any hesitation. “Yes. I may not understand, but I’ve always thought there had to be more than all this.” She waved her hand around the glen.

“And you would believe me? The king of lies?” He raised his brow.

For a moment, her chest creased for him. Despite his imperviousness, something flattened like a shadow over his incredible irises. “It must pain you to be insulted at every turn, with terrible motivations ascribed to your every action.” She tilted her head to study him. “Do you lie?”

“Never.” He didn’t hesitate. “There’s no need, not to mention I hold truth sacrosanct. When one is eternal and powerful beyond all measure, one must set boundaries or life becomes ridiculous. Truth is my boundary.” He studied her with the same intensity she had studied him. She felt him move through her, sifting, testing, as if he could see to her very core. She suspected he could.

Surprising her, he popped to his feet. He reached for her hand, and when she gave it, he pulled her up. “Walk with me before we launch into dessert.” But instead of tripping across the grass, he yanked her toward him.

The world spun and every piece of her flew apart in different directions. Too late, she realized he was destroying her. She had misjudged him.



CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THE WHIRLING RESOLVED, she would have fallen if he hadn't held her tight against him. Heat flowed from his rippling muscles, and his penis burned in a rigid length against the small of her spine. *Ooh*.

Until nausea overtook her.

He splayed his hand beneath her neck. Gentle fire flowed, healing and calm. It righted her wobbly atoms.

Ignoring the protrusion behind her, Verdetta swiveled her neck, taking in the view. An impossibly clear, turquoise ocean stretched away from the sandy coastline on which they stood. Warm sun and breeze swept against her skin. The smell, though, wasn't redolent of brine and salt. Or maybe it was, but a light cover of the scent of smoke banked it. Floating on the bands of gentle gusts, the occasional sweet smell of jasmine added to the mix.

"Where are we?"

He rested his chin on top of her head. "The Sea of Elicher. In Hell. There, on the right bank, rests my vacation palace. I don't spend a great deal of time there." He sounded momentarily wistful.

"*Hell?*" She rotated in his arms and clutched his rock-hard chest as fear spiked through her. The smooth silk of his robe bunched beneath the pads of her fingers. She gripped him to try to keep her balance. "Why are we in Hell?"

He smiled softly and touched her cheek. Heat rushed through her body once more, but this time it tingled a little bit. A wave of energy swept on heat's heels. "I've more power of concealment within this realm than any other, and some conversations should be kept private. Plus, my enemies find the exfoliating beauty of the ocean disconcertingly pure." He lifted a finger and her sneakers disappeared along with her support hose. With his hands still directing her, he rotated her beside him and escorted her into the lapping water.

Balmy, temperate liquid splayed across her ankles and calves. She tipped her toes into the heavy sand, digging them in, delighting in the movement of the tides against her soles. "*Ohh.*" It was better than sex. Better even than chocolate. "I've missed the ocean. Shady Grove has a yearly outing, but they keep us on the boardwalk. Can you imagine the

outcry if one of us was swept out to sea?” Contentment spread through her. The parts of her that were supposed to thrum with Lucifer’s nearness didn’t quite manage, but still – to have a strong man next to her, the ocean at her heels, the sun in the sky... why was there a sun?

He must have read her thoughts. “This realm is both a physical and metaphysical plane. What you perceive as sky is the molten arch of the core of the planet, though it is also a sun as you would know it in a different space-time. Plus, reality is porous. One often seeps into the other. Though to be even more accurate, none of it actually exists at all, though it does.” At her disgruntled look, he laughed. “All that to say, it’s complicated.”

“I suppose I wouldn’t understand your explanations, anyway. I was never very good at math and science.” She tried to take in the view, the reality of where she stood, and failed. Everything seemed too familiar, like her world, but different. Gorgeous striated red rocks rose to high peaks and surrounded the palace. The building, composed of the same stone as the surroundings, disappeared into the landscape in graceful stepped terraces. “Your palace reminds me of Deir El-Bahri in Egypt.”

“Yes.” His strong arm circled her bulging waist as she wobbled in the lapping tide. “The inspiration was mine. I lent it to Hatshepsut and Senemut, her architect and lover. I was moved by their story. Their bravery. Everyone believes being king means writing your own laws, when in fact, it often means further constraint and sacrifice.” His lips tightened before he looked down and pasted on a smile. “And now you’ve softened me sufficiently so I voice my whining complaints like a puling teenage girl denied a night out with the car.”

She laughed. “What an image!” But she patted the hand at her waist in sympathy. “Sometimes, venting isn’t just good for the soul. It’s fun, too.”

“Is it?” He looked out over the expanse, standing tall and unshaken by the tides. “Perhaps I should try it more often.”

“Oh, yes, you should. I love to vent, most especially about my grandson.” She looked back to the palace. “Despite how he often annoys me, he would love to see this likeness to Deir El-Bahri. We used to read about Hatshepsut’s life at bedtime.” She laughed again and shook her head. “It was a romance novel, but he didn’t know it, of course. Later, he minored in Egyptology and bombarded me with the ‘real’ facts, none of which included Senemut as her lover, so really, you’ve just admitted

romance novels are more accurate than books written by historians and archeologists.”

His lips quirked. “Truth may lie in many places.”

“Thanks, Confucius.” The words slipped out as she leaned into him.

He didn’t seem to take offense. “He was a wise man. I enjoyed his company.”

Verdetta sighed and studied the view. It lent her a peace she had forgotten. It spoke of the eternal and the immense swathe of the world that existed beyond human concerns. She cocked her neck to look up at Lucifer. “Don’t tell anyone about the romance novel?”

“Your secret is safe with me, Verdetta.”

She thought it probably was.

His face settled into more serious lines. “You asked for the truth of me. There are some small parts of my story that might be spoken in hushed voices, and much we cannot discuss at all. My evilness, or lack thereof, is chief among the things I must hide.” He gazed down into her eyes.

And all she could see was blue. She could drown in his eyes. Others must have.

With a look she thought she was meant to interpret, but couldn’t, he pulled back, his face expressionless except for menace suddenly sifting from beneath his skin. He looked upward and searched the skies, before he gazed around the red rocky outcrops as if seeking hidden threats. He must have found none, because his shoulders dropped an almost imperceptible millimeter.

“You’re afraid?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “But I thought...”

His Devil’s smile reappeared and he pitched his voice low. “As you surmised, I fear nothing. My duty, however, compels me to discretion.”

“I don’t believe you’re evil, Lucifer. I don’t.”

A look of infinite sadness passed over his expression. “I am what I must be.” He looked out over the distance. “I’ll risk a secret, and from it you may glean what you like. There’s a balance required for physicality to exist, Verdetta. Without the see-saw of good and evil, without duality in every aspect of Creation, existence itself would disappear. In prior incarnations of beings, the motion of the see-saw was smaller. In some, barely perceptible. In this one, the extremes are large, and with great hope for a great purpose. I have a role in the duality that is both enviable and despised.” His brow furrowed. “But I never admit to being pure evil, not

even if deception could better win the war. And make no mistake: there is a war.”

“Against Heaven?” Her heart pounded.

But he shook his head, the movement slight. “No.”

Something in his voice called to her. She patted his hand again. “But you care about what others think of you. Why? You’re— you. You’re so impossibly- you.”

He inclined his head slightly. “I do not believe any sentient creature could exist who will not at some points define himself by the thoughts of others. You wished the truth of me. Here it is: In many ways, I am not so different than humans, but in other ways, I am humanity’s inverse. I am an archangel. I am primordial fire given form. I am the first star of the morning. I bear the light in opposition to the void, but I am also the darkness in which unfathomable chaos lies ever-spinning its web of destruction. In me, the duality exists in extreme measures, even though I operate as the titular head of evil.”

He sighed and looked again to the firmament. “Last born, I am, excepting my parents and perhaps my eldest brother, though I wouldn’t admit it to him, the most powerful being in Creation. I may be more powerful than all but my father, who I am most like as I, too, hold duality within me. I am the god of this one puny physical world, above and below shell. I am its breath, its form, its image, its despair, and its enlightenment.” He hesitated and inhaled. “And with all the power at my command, I fear I’m a miserable bastard, in the colloquial sense of the word. I am too used to getting my own way as there is none to dissuade me. The only check on me is me, which often leads to disappointing outcomes. I have a temper. I am often rash and reckless. Truth to tell, if you had been other than who you are, I might have reacted badly. I was ready to slay. Such is who I am.”

He stroked the hair from her face, but it seemed a calculated move.

“Don’t.” The word escaped her as she pulled back.

His hand dropped. He seemed to understand, even though she wasn’t certain she did.

Instead of pressing her, he gestured toward the wide expanse of water stretching to the horizon. “I wanted you to see the best part of my life so you don’t imagine me always surrounded by brimstone and pits of flame.” He laughed suddenly. “Although, brimstone isn’t so bad. The cliffs and my

palace are fashioned of the stuff and they're quite lovely, I think." He shrugged. "I spend most of my time at the capital palace. My garden is perfection. I would take you there, but too many creatures wander the halls and someone would find me and plague me with one endless demand or another. Another requirement. Another duty." He paused. "I would not wish you to see me at my worst, and I must often be my worst there in order to maintain a tentative peace."

As a wave rushed to shore, she lost her balance and fell into him. He stood like an iron piling dug deep into the ground though he seemed to float at the top of the sand. She suspected nothing could move him unless he wanted to be moved.

"If you're the captive prince in this story, where is your princess to kiss you and make it all better?"

He laughed, his reflective mood fleeing in an instant. "I am a bit self-preoccupied, it's true."

"Are you married?" It didn't seem he was, but how could she know?

"No." He sent her a funny look she couldn't interpret. "Are you considering trying out for the role of my princess?"

She clicked her tongue against her teeth and shoved him. Falling to the side, he clutched his stomach as if she had injured him, barely restraining his laughter.

"Ha, ha. No." And she hadn't. She had intended to borrow him for an hour to fulfill her fantasy, to give her ordinary life a taste of the extraordinary. She had never expected to hold him for longer.

He must have understood. He straightened. "Does it distress you that I haven't fallen at your feet, even if you didn't expect it?" He seemed genuinely curious, though he had to have read her thoughts to pose the question as he did.

She weighed what he asked, but shook her head. "No. You're beautiful, and kind, and supernatural, and amazing." She patted his arm. "But I never expected more than a moment. I think you would make an excellent lover..."

"The very best."

"... and a friend..."

"Of such, I am less certain."

"... but I haven't fallen in love with you, though I like you far more than I expected to. I hadn't counted on your sense of humor or your

gentility. I didn't expect you to humor an old woman's madcap escapade. And, if I haven't fallen for you, I can't criticize you for not falling for me."

Looking thoughtful, he twitched his hand. A picnic blanket appeared, but not the one from the glen in all its scratchy, machine-woven gray glory. This one was soft, padded, like a very large, queen-sized flat cushion covered in red silk.

"Perhaps certain physical and physiological aspects are creating a barrier to your imagination. Perhaps to mine, as well."

"We can't all look like you, you know." She pretended to grumble.

"Thank Heaven. Still, improvements might be made." He lowered her to the blanket and when she was seated, her legs bent at an awkward angle, he laid his palm upon her head. Flames flared through her limbs, and not gentle ones this time. They swam up her legs, down to her feet, and all through her veins, sending her nerves screaming. She gasped with the pain, but couldn't find her voice to scream as every part of her burned and stretched before contracting smaller.

The agony lasted forever. It ended in seconds. When it passed, her body felt different. Lighter, as if she floated. All of her zinged and snapped. The burn on her fingers disappeared. So too did the age marks on her hand, along with her wrinkles and varicose veins.

She stretched out her legs in front of her and laughed. "What did you... oh!" Because her ankles no longer bulged at the point they connected to her feet. No, her legs looked like twin stamens, drawing up to... She lifted her skirt to mid-thigh. To slender, firm thighs. She twisted them back and forth, examining them, before she ran her hands over her flat belly, her hourglass waist, and her perky breasts.

She stared at him. "What did you do?" she repeated in a whisper.

He shrugged, an elegant ripple of his wide shoulders. "I've made a small alteration for my own sake. I can find beauty in almost any creature, but I draw the line at tearing skin with little more than the force of friction. Older skin." The look he sent her was pointed. It landed heavy between her legs.

She understood. As she had aged and lost collagen and other important hormones, her epidermis had turned to butterfly wings: easily torn, easily debrided, easily pained.

"Better?"

“Much.” The word stuck and emerged a garbled syllable, so she nodded.

“You are lovelier than I imagined. How cruel humanity sometimes seems.” With a wave of his hand, plates appeared heaped with a confection she couldn’t name. “Exotic fruits and cream in a flaky thin crust. I drew it from my palace kitchens. Mothra demons are surprisingly gifted confectioners. Tell me what you think.” He sank down next to her.

With a new fork in hand, she snatched a careful bite. Intense flavors melted against her younger tongue, both tart and sweet, and also airy. A moan caught at her throat and slipped past her lips. “Oh, it’s wonderful!”

“It is, isn’t it?” he agreed, lifting the glass that appeared in his outstretched hand. Another glass sat beside her plate. “This vintage grows here in my vineyards. Brimstone flavors it with smoke.” With a tiny salute, he sipped.

She reached for her glass. “I wonder why we think brimstone smells like rotten eggs. I don’t smell eggs at all... oh!”

She startled as his palm wrapped her thigh just above her knee. A different sort of heat sped up her veins. She gulped and dropped her fork. He waved it away, along with the plates, leaving only their goblets hanging in the air. His eyes grew intense and almost feral. He looked as if he might eat her.

“Lucifer...” Her voice whispered past the stone in her throat as he revealed yet another side of himself.

“You called upon me for a reason, Verdetta. You risked my presence, which was either incredibly brave, or incredibly stupid.” He paused, a small smile twisting his lips though he continued to look intense. “I believe you to be courageous. You want to fuck me.” There was no hesitation in his voice, only surety. He leaned closer, his knee brushing hers, sending sparks flying. Her core heated and melted, caving so she angled toward him.

But before she touched him, she swayed back and reached for the glass. Tipping it so she hid behind the small rim, she tasted dark, tart liquid. It rolled over her tongue, coating her mouth with cherries and chocolate and yes, the smoke he had mentioned. It was delicious, as delicious as she imagined he might be.

He thought she was brave? Her entire insides quaked.

“Will you disappoint me, Verdetta?” The words slid against her skin like lips though only his hand touched her.

Clasping the glass, she weighed her words. “Despite this piece of wonderful magic you’ve used to make me young again, a state which I’m very much enjoying, by the way... I’m old, Lucifer, and death haunts my steps. The risk of summoning you seemed worth the potential reward. But you’re wrong about my reasons for doing so. I was wrong about my reasons.” Her voice dropped to a whisper.

He laughed, sending heat to her cheeks again. “No. I’m not, and you weren’t. You’re wearing my oud, knowing it would appeal to my baser instincts. You want to fuck me.”

She shook her head, but smiled at his confidence. It was well-earned. “You are nearly impossible to resist.” But he was still wrong. “I called you because I thought to have a final adventure, a chance to be wicked, and to do something wild.” She spread her fingers over her other thigh. “But...”

But now, sitting with him, feeling the overwhelming power channeled and focused upon her, yet chatting with him as if they might be friends, sex seemed less possible than it had before he had given her back her youth. What she had wanted had shifted and changed. She hadn’t expected him to be so kind, or to be a real person with thoughts and feelings. What had seemed like a lark now seemed unwise.

She liked him. She didn’t want to stop liking him when he forgot her in a week. If she slept with him, it would hurt her soul to be relegated to a forgotten number on a spreadsheet. A woman could tell when she was going to be special to a man. She wasn’t.

“You enjoy sex. Probably constant sex.” She picked her words carefully, trying to find the right way to tell him no.

“I’m a celestial. We require almost constant sexual release or our energies seek out other outlets. Dangerous and destructive outlets.” His hand rose higher on her thigh, but slowly, giving her heart a chance to beat out of her chest with every subtle movement. He leaned toward her, deliberately invading her personal space, though this time she didn’t object. “The translating of the *Liber Fornicationis* necessitated some effort. You must wish to fuck.”

She winced, causing him to laugh again. “Might we use another term?”

“Human females. I’d forgotten how delightful you can be. Fuck. Cock. Cunt. Pussy.” With each word, his fingers drifted higher until they met the demarcation line between her leg and torso, a hairsbreadth from the heat of her. “The words are there for a reason, Verdetta. They’re gruff against the tongue. They’re hard and dirty and weighted – like sex. Like the best sex.”

His thumb stroked a line up and down the inside of her thigh in small circles until it met at his other fingers. She gasped, but he leaned further and brushed his pillow lips against hers. Once. Twice. Light butterfly touches that served to increase her hunger. Moaning, she swayed into him. She couldn’t help it.

Suddenly, she was on her back. He lay over her, kissing her with an expertise she had never imagined possible. With his tongue and lips, he explored her mouth, dragging her soul to the surface and bringing all her body into a state of rabid hunger. It had been so many years since she had been kissed other than on the cheek, she wasn’t certain she remembered how to respond, but it didn’t matter. He knew what to do. All she had to do was let him.

With expert ministrations, he drew her concerns from her. His tongue invaded, stroking and delving, conquering and urging her to conquer in return. Wildness spiraled up through her body and she took his face in her hands, feeling the texture of his flawless skin under her fingers. He felt like satin covered steel, hard and achingly lush.

He took her hand and wrapped it around his silk covered member. It rose strong and proud, and she should have gasped with the joy of having it in her palm. Instead, she remembered he had already been hard when he had first appeared in the clearing.

His erection wasn’t for her. It wasn’t because of her. It was just his resting state.

Reluctantly, she withdrew her grasp and placed her hands against his chest, pushing him back the few inches he chose to move. Everything in her called her a fool for passing up the opportunity of having sex with the devil, but he wasn’t, as the kids would say, that into her.

She still had her pride, a pride originating in an era long-gone. Despite everything, it still rode her. “I’m sorry, Lucifer. I thought I could, but...”

He rested upon one palm and stroked her cheek with the other. His expression seemed puzzled, but not angry. “Why do you resist fucking

me?”

When she winced again, he chuckled. His fingers fell from her cheek to her neck and slid down over her breast. His touch was perfect. Not too soft. Not too harsh. Everything about him moved with the ageless grace of a dance. Fire lanced to the secret part of her, and by his expression and the way his eyes glowed, he knew what he did as it landed. It landed hard and burned bright.

Suddenly, her clothing disappeared. Naked, she froze.

“Verdetta. You were, and are, lovely at twenty-six. Lush. You’re wearing my scent, which I appreciate, by the way. You brought me fried chicken. You’ve a kind heart and a courageous spirit, and these are qualities I admire above all others. Plus, I am not at the moment, bored. It is an incomparable gift.”

He seduced with words, but still, she pushed at his chest to move him away. Though he couldn’t be moved by force, he sat back upon his heels and studied her. With a smile, his clothing fell from him and disappeared.

Lord, he was beautiful. Velvet, taut skin glided over planes of rippled muscles. He was so perfectly constructed, he looked more like a statue than a man, more a work of art than a creature of flesh and blood. Unable to resist, she sat up and ran her palm over his thigh. A knowing gleam entered his brilliant eyes. It punched her in the stomach.

But beautiful or not, he would forget her. She couldn’t get past it. Ignoring her nakedness, which didn’t matter, now she was young and firm once more, she studied him in return. “I thought I could have casual sex, Lucifer. I truly did. You’re right. An enormous part of me wanted it. But now...”

“You’re just overwhelmed.” A glass of wine materialized to hover in front of her. When she didn’t take it, he placed it in her hand. “Drink.”

“Are you drugging me?”

“Don’t insult me. I’m tempering your trepidation by giving you a moment to breathe.” His fingers on her hip pulsed. “You were raised in an age of requirement. You were taught your duties, and one of those was to be faithful only to your husband. But we no longer live in such an age. And you no longer have such a duty.”

She gripped the stem so tight, she feared cracking it.

He looked back toward the sweep of horizon growing red-orange as if with a setting sun. “I understand requirement. My entire existence

revolves around it. I also understand wanting to escape, if even for a moment, but what I don't understand is refusing the escape when it is offered. It isn't a sin to enjoy your body, Verdetta, no more so than eating a slice of cake." His blue eyes seared her to the bone. "I am incapable of love, so if you're waiting for some sort of declaration, I will disappoint you."

Annoyance filled her. She pushed it away. "I wasn't looking for love, Lucifer. I just don't wish to be one of a million notches on the bedpost." She inhaled. "I'm sorry."

Tilting his head, he stared at her until he huffed. "I have never been turned down before. Never. It is a novel experience I would choose not to repeat." His gaze slipped up her naked body. With gentle fingers, he followed its path, caressing her belly, over her breasts, her nipples, before cupping her cheek.

She angled her chin into his palm and kissed his hand, making him smile. He stroked his thumb over her skin. Another flood of heat sped through her veins so she kissed his hand again. His fingers stilled before gliding down her neck, between the valley of her breasts, to stop at the flat abdomen she hadn't seen in sixty years. When he angled to press his lips just below her belly button, she jumped.

He looked at her through mussed hair sweeping over his forehead as he rose again. "You want me, Verdetta Maille. Fate has pushed us together, and I never discount the hand of the universe. And now you are once again built for pleasure." He stroked the length of her hair and finished at her breast. "The perfect age to fuck. The age when females transition from girls to women. Bones elongate. Baby fat fades. The body thrums with an almost unquenchable desire. As yours does right now." His thumb brushed her nipple, already hard and aching.

His words stirred her, but despite the fire rushing through her, the one vibrating between her legs in a place she had thought dead forever, and despite his essential kindness, if they... fucked... she would be left with only a pyric victory. A long sigh escaped her lips. The problem with having lived so long was that with every year it grew harder to fool herself.

He waved away their glasses and dragged her up and toward him in one easy movement. With gentle fingers, he stroked her hair back from her face. "I am a sucker for redheads with green eyes."

Verdetta swallowed. “Are you?” Her heart pounded throughout her body.

“Yes. Did you know you’re the result of an ancient mating between my Fallen and humanity? All red-hair derives from angel DNA, as do green eyes. A remnant of an ancient time. In the days when I penned the *Fornicationis*, most witches’ power similarly came through the Fallen line. You are not a witch, but I sense fate in you.”

He seduced with words. He seduced by appealing to her mind. He knew she would want to know more, and he knew she would feel special for being singled out as having a trace of angelic blood.

“I’m not falling for it, Lucifer.”

“There’s nothing to fall for, Verdetta. I speak only the truth.” He nuzzled her neck, sending fireworks shooting through her body.

In response, she moaned low in her throat as his lips worked magic against her skin. He trailed kisses over her collar bone to her shoulder, which shouldn’t be so sensitive, but was. His hands still gripped her arms, anchoring her, which was a good thing since she would otherwise have melted into a puddle.

“Y-you w-would have sex with anybody. I w-wanted s-something different.”

“Did you?” The words reverberated against her neck as he changed directions.

She might have responded, but he captured her lips once more, drowning her exclamation of surprise. Her body flowered under his caresses as his fingers left their grip and evolved over her budded nipples. Pinching them lightly, he replaced one of his hands with his mouth, leaving her free to groan up to the sky as he brought more fire to the inferno he built within her. When he grew tired of suckling, though everything in her caverned into a void of aching need, he pushed her down again upon the blanket.

His hands roved. Everywhere. No part of her was left unexplored by his lips and fingers until she stopped objecting and started urging him with small movements and cries. With a perfect pressure, he tempted her higher. Her body rolled into a state of hunger she couldn’t ignore. Her fingers latched into his thick, silky hair and pulled him closer.

But she couldn’t control where he moved, or when. With his own timing, he flitted and unfurled her until she became a mindless thing,

living in sensation.

The incoming tide rolled over the blanket, the chill water against her backside doing nothing to dampen the conflagration within. Kneeling, he drew her buttocks up onto his thighs and used his body to spread her legs, revealing her open sex to his gaze. He played within her folds, tempting, taunting, before he drew her hips higher still, his strength on display as he held her easily against gravity. His mouth latched onto her secret button, the one that hadn't worked in what seemed a thousand years.

Everything spiraled: the world, her, everything. Before she could gasp a breath, her entire body tightened. His magic unrolled within her, corkscrewing her up, up, up, until she exploded to the stars.

When finally she floated back down, he hovered over her, watching her carefully. "Now," he whispered, the scent of her on his lips, "tell me again why you won't fuck me."



CHAPTER SIX

VERDETTA LAY QUIESCENT beneath him. After her orgasm, she was ripe for the plucking, and Hell knew, he had never before quibbled over questionable consent. Plus, she wanted him. But something was missing. She held back a part of herself even in the throes of orgasm. Why?

He wouldn't ordinarily have cared, but there was something special about the woman panting on the wet blanket, even aside from the courage and kindness he had instantly adored. Maybe it was only she had appeared to him aged, so his every gentle instinct, of which he had, admittedly, few, rose to the fore.

He brushed her lips with his, and though she didn't resist his caress, she didn't plunge into him, either. He drew back. "I won't hurt you, Verdetta. Your body is perfectly poised to accept me within." He reconsidered. "There might be some stretch, but I am used to holding back my thrusts."

A very narrow nod told him she understood, but when her palms pushed against his chest instead of gripping him closer, he sighed and moved away. He summoned more wine and drank deep. His cock was hard and ready. It was usually hard and ready, so it didn't signify. Plus, she was lovely. He hadn't been sure what a reversal in age would reveal, but it had been worth it.

Redheads. They smelled and tasted different. They did something to him.

She angled to her perfectly-shaped ass on the water-soaked blanket, a flush of pink covering her fair skin. "Lucifer, I..."

"Don't seem to want my cock in your cunt." He smiled.

She nodded, shook her head, and nodded again. "It's complicated."

"Given you're the one who performed the sex summoning, I would have to agree. Tell me." Because if nothing else, her reasons must prove interesting.

She inhaled an audible breath. "Because I don't want to leave you and know you'll forget me. I was raised to have more self-esteem, though you might not know it from the way I've acted." She shook her head. "When I found the book, I was curious. For the first time in forever, I had a puzzle to solve, but I solved it too easily. There I was, primed to run, in a

metaphorical sense, given I need a walker just to shuffle about, and I had a spell to bring the Otherworld right to my feet. It was a heady feeling.”

“Did you translate the entire book?” Because there were passages he should have left out, passages betraying the underlying nature of the world he had thought to share with witches who already understood the thin veil behind which reality perched. Verdetta was not a witch, though she might have been had a few chromosomes landed differently.

“No.” She smiled. “If you want to talk about fate, I opened the book right to the spell. I glanced at the other pages, but I decided to translate the words between the brackets first, figuring they had to be more important. And once I did, well,” she smiled. “I had to work fast so I never got the chance to read the other parts. Why? Would I have been able to turn my grandson into a handsome prince?”

“No.” He paused and reconsidered. “Maybe. But it wouldn’t have been easy, and I wouldn’t have allowed it had you succeeded. The natural order and all that. I do my best not to interfere.” He weighted his words and expression so she would understand. She, too, would be subject to the normal rules. He would have to return her to her eighty-fourth year.

She snapped her fingers but didn’t look as disappointed as he feared she might. “Damn.”

Part of him relaxed at her easy acceptance.

As the water rose about his thighs so they effectively sat in the sea, he sipped his wine and grew hungry. Flicking his hand toward the water, he sent the swell back out in contravention of the tides. With another flick, he dried both them and the blanket before producing a plate of apricot-filled chocolates. They were his favorite. They never disappointed. He allowed the chocolate to dissolve against his tongue. Delicious.

When she bit into one, she echoed his thoughts and added an appreciative groan.

Damn, she had made him harder.

He considered the plate and attempted to distract his wayward cock. “I always wonder if food tastes the same to a celestial as it does to a human. I can read a person’s thoughts, more or less, at least the ones that perch at the top of brain. I can understand the human body. Intimately.” He sent her a look from beneath his lashes.

She laughed. “I’ll testify to it in any court.”

Picking up a chocolate, he turned it in his fingers. "But these- how does chocolate taste to you? Apricot? And the wine?" He shook his head and swallowed the candy in one bite.

She nibbled at the confection. "But why stop your questions at chocolate? What if sex feels different to us, or pain, or heartache? If you don't mind my saying so..."

He tilted his head. "Could I stop you?"

"Apparently."

He laughed. When was the last time he had felt so easy? He couldn't remember. He circled his hand for her to continue.

"I think maybe you're looking at the question wrong. We humans all feel things differently. We all taste things differently. Even as we age, tastes evolve. The difference you're wondering about probably isn't so much a gap between species, as it is a trough between individuals."

"A trough? Like those that feed pigs?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Or cows. I prefer cows."

More laughter welled within him. He leaned toward her. "I am exceedingly glad I met you, Verdetta Maille. You have no idea how refreshing this conversation has been for me."

"For me, too. I'm glad I could offer you something since... well..." She blushed a profuse red and glanced toward his cock. "I have to admit, a huge part of me wants to try out the rest of what you've got trapped in that beautiful body of yours, but..."

"But?" The rub. He let his hands fall to his thighs so as not to frighten her away from honesty as she circled to it.

She pursed her lips and looked toward the ocean. "But I don't want to resent you when I wake up tomorrow. You're too astonishing for me to risk lessening the experience of meeting you, talking to you- laughing with you. But the other thing is..."

He waited. He was very good at waiting, until he wasn't.

"There's something I sense in you that reminds me of how I felt during my marriage. Sex with my husband was something I had to do. A requirement. But all the while, I wanted to be with someone else, and it created this loneliness and sadness in me even Frank could see. I don't want to be Frank, and I feel I could be." She paused. "Is there someone you're in love with?"

Though his skin was impenetrable, her question pierced through. “No.” And there never would be, which could be depressing, but normally wasn’t. “I am afraid I am not built to harbor strong emotions, most especially one as complex as love. Even my rage is more a matter of expediency than depth.”

The admission cost him. He lay upon his back and studied the firmament, a deep blue so dark it seemed almost black. Tiny pinpricks of light, really a type of quartz, mirrored the stars visible above-shell. Fondness wasn’t love. And love wasn’t in-love. But what he was capable of feeling had always been enough.

So why did her question poke at him?

She stretched out next to him and took his hand. It lent an odd kind of comfort he hadn’t known he wanted or needed.

“Then, what is it I sense?”

He angled his head so he could see her. “You’re trying to impart human emotions upon me, but I’m not human, Verdetta.” He gestured toward the sky with his free hand. “I am more that than this.” He laid his palm over his heart.

She clicked her tongue against her white, glistening teeth and happiness speared through him. It was a pleasure seeing her so refreshed. Perhaps once he eradicated the archons, he would go out in the world and renew all the elderly, just for fun. To Hell with the natural order. It was his order, after all, under his control.

“You’re human enough, Lucifer, though for some reason, you keep reminding yourself you’re not. Maybe it helps keep the distance.” Before he could respond to that impertinence, she continued. “But if it isn’t that there’s someone else, why do you seem so sad?”

He held the answer in his heart. *There is my retainer, Gregor, who ages more and more every day. You remind me of him, or you did, before I de-aged you. I treat him terribly, sometimes with utter contempt, but he followed me to Hell, even though a purer angel never existed in my father’s Heaven. He destroyed his life, his friendships, parted from his family, for my sake. He almost died protecting me in battle with my brothers, and he never really understood the stakes because I couldn’t tell him the truth of the farce. But I am fonder of him than anyone else in existence, and he’s going to leave me. Somehow, when I look at you, I see him. I feel him, and I suppose it is this remove that you sense.*

He angled up again. "I mean you no disrespect, Verdetta."

"I know. Actually, I feel more respected than I ever hoped to feel... *Your Majesty*." She gave him his title with a laugh, as if hoping to jolly him back into a good humor.

Surprisingly, it worked. "Ah, I could grow to care for you too much, Verdetta Maille." Like he did when in snake form, he twisted around her and dragged her up into his arms before laying her upon the blanket. Covering her, he kissed a line down her neck but stopped and looked into her eyes before he sighed again and moved away. "You don't know what you're missing. I don't always take the time for seduction, but when I do, all parties enjoy it."

She scrambled back into a crisscross position and plucked at the blanket. "No doubt." Her gaze latched upon the silk. "I spilled the chocolates. Or you did."

He waved the stain away and set a new glass of wine to hover at her side.

Sipping it, her brow furrowed. "I'm sure you can give me the wildest orgasm of my life, but maybe what I'm really looking for, down beneath all the other excuses and justifications, is to recreate the feelings I had with my first love. The rush. The exchange of more than bodies. The sense of being swept away by something so much bigger than myself. And yes," she held up her palm, laughing, "I know you're bigger than me. I know I'll never feel anything so supernatural in my life." She glanced at his cock once more before blushing and looking back to his face. "But it's a different sort of swept away."

"I wouldn't know. I've never been swept away by anything." The admission was startlingly easy to make. Maybe she had been right. He would have forgotten her if she had fucked him. Now, he wouldn't. She held a singular place in his existence.

Licking the rim of her glass free of the burgundy stain, she paused. "Our conversation, all of this..." She waved her hand around the blanket. "It's made me realize how true love only comes around once, because by all rights, I should be infatuated with you."

He covered his heart and jolted back. "Foiled yet again, and this time by honesty! How you deprive the devil of his due!" But he smiled before sipping from his own glass so she wouldn't be troubled by her rejection. He wasn't. If anything, he respected her more for knowing what she

wanted and what she didn't. Besides, there were millions of other women to ease his ache.

Jumping to his feet, he held out his hand, and when she placed her palm against his, he lifted her. They walked to the crashing small waves, out to the depth of his waist and her shoulders.

"Do you swim?"

"Not in forever. But I'm not bad at it." Without warning, she dove under and away from him, surfaced, and began to jettison in the direction of his palace.

To make certain she was safe while at a distance from his forcefield, he emptied the sea of its animals by sending them all out to deeper water and creating a barrier. Some of the creatures who swam in Hell delighted in rending flesh. He took off after her, easily catching up. Together, they stroked through the warm water until she tired. When she stopped, he raised a flat rock onto which he jumped, landing on his ass, before extending his hand to help her do the same.

For some time, they lay back upon the heated stone, Hell's setting sun hot upon their drying skin.

She sighed a sound of contentment, before turning her head and squinting at him. Her palm shaded her eyes against the light dancing from the surface. "I haven't been swimming in ages. Thank you, Lucifer. I should repay you..."

"No. Not with your body. If you wish to fuck, I'm ready, but I won't accept some sort of exchange for a gift in which I equally share." Or for any gift, for that matter.

She nodded, a small smile on her lips. "I knew you were a gentleman."

Before he could blush, not that he would, he twisted onto his side. "Tell me about your life, Verdetta. I find myself curious about this love you once had that spoiled you for my wiles. Not your husband?"

She laughed. The sound tinkled on the air as she rotated to face him. "No, unfortunately, though I loved him as one loves family and friends. But I am exceedingly grateful to him for my children. They are my entire heart and existence now. They made every sacrifice worthwhile, and if I had to live through ten very average, dull, and predictable lives to see them happy, I would. Only one of the two remains, though: my son, who lives in Baltimore. We talk once a week. I usually see him and his family

at Christmas.” Her face folded. “My daughter died ten years ago. I still don’t understand how I survived her death.” She paused. “Cancer.”

He winced. “A brutal parting. What is your daughter’s name?”

“Solange Maille Marks.” Her voice twisted. “She was my sun.”

He sent his senses out and searched through the residents interred within the Punishing. Relief filled him when he didn’t find her. It would have been difficult to extricate her soul, though not impossible. Paperwork. Precedent set. He shouldn’t even contemplate the mercy, but Verdetta had crept under his skin. “She is not within Hell. Her soul moved onward at her transition. Does the knowledge help?”

She bit her lips between her teeth and nodded quickly. “It does. Thank you.” But her eyes remained sad with the memory. “Do you know where...”

“I can only tell you she does not suffer.”

She nodded again. It took a moment, but her expression lightened. “Good. Thank you.”

She tugged at his heart. Her bravery in all aspects could be admired. Had he ever enjoyed simply talking to a woman? Her presence with him now bore the stench of fate, but it wasn’t her, per se. No. It was...

He surged upright as the realization swept through him. It wasn’t her, but what she pointed him toward. A child. A wife. People whom he could revolve around and care for, if not love with the same degree of desperation Verdetta did.

A child. A bride. A more personal sense of purpose than the overarching one he carried for all Creations.

For the first time in forever, excitement sparked within him. He leaned over and kissed Verdetta’s forehead. “You have given me an enormous gift, young lady.”

She giggled.

He brushed the soft red hair from her forehead. Already, it dried with the heat. “It is no small thing to give the devil purpose.”

“But you won’t tell me what it is?”

He smiled.

She clicked her tongue. “Well, maybe it aligns with this odd sense inside me that says I was meant to soften you for love. Am I right?”

He squinted at her. “Are you certain you’re not some ensorcelled witch?”

She laughed. "Pretty certain." Grabbing his hand, she pressed a kiss to the back, before she sighed and flopped down again. It hadn't taken her long to remember how to be young and filled with bubbling sap. She bent and arched without second thought.

"The clockwork mechanism of this universe revolves with an often startling precision. I fought against it in my more reckless youth. Now, I appreciate the symmetry."

A wife. A child. Yes. He would accept the path. Not love, but most definitely love-adjacent, which wasn't so terrible as the awful loneliness with which he had always lived.

She tapped him on the arm, interrupting his thoughts. "You said you aren't built to fall in love. Maybe you just haven't been ready before now. Besides, whatever you think you will or won't feel won't matter once you meet her. Nothing will matter, only her."

"You sound awfully certain about a mythical meeting."

She smiled one of her soft smiles, the ones meant to make him feel better. "The one thing of which I'm certain is that fate works to push true lovers together. If you're part of this system, logic says it must also be able to push you." She cocked her head. "Though it is easy to screw up love once you've found it. Too easy."

"And you think to launch me in some sweet girl's direction?" he asked softly.

"I think you're going to launch yourself. You seem like a man perched at the edge of an enormous cliff, ready to take a flying leap."

He laughed. "Good thing I can fly."

She swatted his arm. He didn't even mind the impertinence.

"I haven't met the singularity of whom you speak in all my time in flesh, and I've entertained millions, maybe billions, of lovers. I am incapable of love, Verdetta, I assure you." But something squirmed inside him. He couldn't recognize it immediately, but it urged him to greater questions.

She huffed. "That's what every man I've ever met says just before he falls." Verdetta sat up and shook out her red locks. He sat as well. The sky darkened above them. With a sigh, he waved his hand and returned them to the blanket in the grass clearing above-shell where it was still mid-afternoon.

Good. He would rather leave her in light than darkness.



CHAPTER SEVEN

VERDETTA GASPED, HER head swiveling to all sides. He sat straighter and did a quick sweep in response. Odd how her safety had taken on such significance, but maybe it was just he needed to hear more of her story. He had never paid too much attention to tales of love, figuring they were based on emotions, and therefore inherently flawed. But maybe he had missed something.

Or, maybe not, but while he was still in corporeal form, what harm could it do to explore the subject at greater depth? He wasn't Michael. He didn't claim to know the all.

He laid his hand upon her Verdetta's leg to capture her attention. "Before I go, would you tell me about the man who wasn't your husband? What makes you wish to be with him over half-a-century later?" He snatched a handful of grass and threw the blades into the air. Hovering, they fragranced the air.

She sent her gaze around the glade before returning it to him. "Clothes first? It's easy to forget propriety with you, but anyone could happen upon us here."

With a wave, he dressed her in a cherry-colored sundress. He didn't know why. It just suited her. As he robed himself in a knitted black lounging outfit, she laughed and smoothed her new dress over her legs before reaching out to grab some green. He let the other blades fall.

"A new dress and an opportunity to talk about Lucius Hunter? Now you're just spoiling me."

"Lucius Hun... seriously?" He checked her mind before shaking his head. "The synchronic nature of the universe never fails to amaze me with its perfection. In modern times, I often use the name Lucien Hunter when I don't wish mortals to run screaming from me in terror. It's an adaptation of my name. Lucien and Lucius mean 'light,' as does Lucifer. Hunter, of course, refers to predators, of which I am undoubtedly the first and greatest." He shook his head. "More and more, I believe I was meant to meet you, Verdetta Maille."

She nodded. "I hope I'm your friend, even if I never see you again."

"You should most definitely hope to never to see me again." But a warm light spread though him. He had few friends. Just Beliel and Gregor,

really. “But I shall count you as one.”

Her face tightened before evening out again. “I was friends with Frank, too. My husband. Friendship has its solaces, you know.”

He didn’t, not really. He had always stood distant even from those he most trusted. It was who he was. *What* he was. “But you married Frank, not Lucius. A friend, not the man you were in-love with. Why?” He leaned forward and waited.

Her head bobbed from side to side as she considered. “Frank was someone I grew up with. We ran in the same circle. At a certain point, life just threw us at each other. Everyone I knew adored him because he was successful and stable- everyone but me, at least in the way that mattered. Maybe I would have fallen in love with him if I hadn’t already given my heart to Lucius, but I doubt it. I think true love can’t be grown out of caring, though ordinary love certainly can.”

Can’t force true love. Check. Not that he would try. “Go on.”

“Lucius was wild and unsuitable. Even I knew, in my rapturous, sexual haze, he could never give me the nice house, country club membership, or social acceptance I had been raised to expect.”

“But Frank fit.”

Her face fell and her fingers stilled on the dress. She seemed to draw her memories close as she nodded. “I’m not proud of it, but at the time I thought all the trappings were important.”

He leaned closer. “What accounted for the difference of how you felt for the two men? Why did you fall in love with one and not the other?” As always, when his curiosity was aroused, he pressed. He had to remind himself not to raise the shadows and storms, but to sit quietly, for her sake.

Though he would prefer to shove her against a tree and bark questions until he puzzled out the mystery she seemed to hold.

A soft smile turned her lips. “You won’t like the answer.” She gestured toward his head. “I see the wheels turning. You’re trying to identify love, since you claim to be unable to feel the emotion.”

“It isn’t a baseless claim.”

“For now.” She began smoothing her dress again. “Anyway, it wasn’t a matter of looks or brains. Both men were handsome, though completely different. Both were intelligent, though Frank was better at things like math and spreadsheets, and Lucius was better at spatial and mechanical reasoning.” She paused before sighing. “Frank was the better man from a

moral perspective. He looked at the world in black and white. He helped keep me on the straight and narrow because it was where he naturally resided. My grandson inherited that same gift. Lucius, on the other hand, was a bit like you describe yourself: rash and reckless. There was no path to be found with him, only an endless green expanse of possibility.”

“I like my namesake better already.”

She huffed. “But the morality didn’t matter, though it probably should have. What mattered was more of a feeling inside me.”

He wanted to snap at her vagueness, but he refrained.

She must have noticed. She patted his leg. “I’m trying to explain as best I can, Lucifer.”

He covered her hand with his and squeezed. “Take your time.”

She nodded, her gaze softening as she remembered. “When I was with Lucius, everything in me stilled. The earth didn’t just shift, it stopped spinning altogether. Wind stopped blowing. I stopped breathing. I felt trapped by an ocean that blocked out all sights and sounds that weren’t centered in him. I even thought he had a halo, though it was only the overhead lights of the diner where we met. I was with friends and Lucius was bussing tables. He picked up this almost-full glass of malted. The chocolate ran down his hand. He licked it off before our eyes met, and nothing else mattered. Until it did.”

“What went wrong?” Because how could anyone walk away from the feelings she described. It made no logical sense. If he was capable of feeling anything similar, he would cling tight with every molecule of his being, and some that weren’t his, too.

She shrugged again. “We dated in secret because my friends and family would have been horrified to see me with a slicker. That’s what we called the guys who greased back their hair, wore leather, and rode motorcycles. The dropouts. The losers.” She scrunched her nose. “But while I crawled all over Lucius in bed, and believe me, I crawled for him, too, I also went to boring parties and dinners every Saturday and Wednesday nights with Frank Maille.”

“And married him.”

She nodded. “Our wedding night was the worst span of hours I’ve ever spent. I had put him off for months, but then he proposed in front of my entire family at Thanksgiving. I didn’t feel I could say no. He wanted a Christmas wedding, so that’s what we had.”

He helped her over the pause as she drifted. "You weren't a virgin, though."

"Hell no!"

He laughed and stroked back her drying hair fluffing about her face. "I see I've become a bad influence, at least as concerns your language."

"Ooh, the worst!" But her smile said she didn't mind. "Well, as you might expect, I let Lucius have his way with me quite a number of times before my marriage. Frank never realized. He didn't have much experience, if any. Had he asked, I'm not sure what I would have told him, but he never did. He rutted into me without much more than two squeezes of my breasts in our room at the local *Vacation Arms Hotel*. Maybe he thought they were sponges he needed to wring dry. Later in our marriage, he would touch me. Down there."

"Your clit. Vagina. Snatch. Pussy. Cunt." He supplied the relevant words in a whisper since she wouldn't say them.

Blushing bright red, she nodded. "I think he pretended to buff wax over a car."

He laughed again. "For a prude, you're rather delightful, Verdetta Maille."

If possible, the red on her cheeks deepened. "Lucius didn't think I was a prude. He drew something out of me I'd never felt before or since. It was as if all of me only came alive in his arms. He would touch me, and fire bloomed everywhere. My body, my mind, my soul. That's how I know the physical fire you light in me isn't enough, and not really what I was looking for, though I didn't know it when I called you. No offense."

"None taken." He tilted his head to study her. "Explain the difference. I don't have the understanding of it yet."

She thought for a moment before she responded, her words dripping out in slow measure. "What you need to know, Lucifer, is how my soul danced with Lucius. Nothing felt wrong. My arms ached to hold him when he wasn't there. Physically ached. I could have lain in bed with him forever if he would have let me. He would laugh, and a strange light filled me. He would worry, and I'd crease down the middle. Every story he told fascinated me, even the dumb, boring ones, and everything he wouldn't tell me, well, it cut me to the quick. After the first week dating him, I couldn't imagine living without him. I could barely go home to my bed. It felt like half of me had been left behind."

“And then?”

She inhaled through her nose, held her breath, before exhaling. “I gave in to reality. Lucius was never going to amount to anything, except maybe dying young and leaving a beautiful corpse. So, I broke his heart rather than gamble on what everyone would have assured me was a losing bet. Lucius got called to Vermont because his grandfather was dying. Plus, it was Thanksgiving week. He wanted me to come with him, to meet his family. He was going to ask his uncle for a job in the machine shop where the uncle worked as a foreman, and he said he would marry me. We could live in a one-bedroom for less money.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Practicality prevented true love?” If so, it was a hurdle he didn’t need to consider.

“Yes. Horrible as it is to admit it. And timing. And the good opinion of those around me. All terrible reasons, but in the end, it was the choice I made.” She glanced over at Lucifer again. “I broke my heart, too.”

He squeezed her hand again, sending what comfort he could through her flesh. “Loss is the nature of your world.” With his other hand, he wove his fingers through her hair and played with the ends. “Is it how you measure love? By how broken you’re left without the other person?”

“It’s one of the ways. More importantly, I think love is a feeling of completeness. When you have it, you’re in love. When you don’t, you’re broken.”

Broken. Yes. Maybe he was. He certainly lacked something. She had given him the screen through which he could sift his feelings for his intended bride. Not that he intended to fall in love with the woman who would give him a child, but maybe he could measure his reactions by the degree he wanted to stay or leave. It was something to contemplate.

“Thank you, Verdetta. The gift you’ve just given me is invaluable.” He looked at the sky. Duty called. “I’m afraid it is time to say goodbye.”

Standing, he held out his hand. She placed her palm to his and he pulled her up before wrapping her against him. He laid his chin on top of her head until she pulled back.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t fuck you, Lucifer. You’re a good sport.”

“Said no one else. Ever.” Laughter bubbled through him once more. Any further time spent in her company and he might just move in to Shady Grove so they could continue conversing. He could drive the Glory Bus, whatever it was. He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. “I think

you really did soften me, though I fear there's a few demons requiring torture and murder below shell who won't notice much of a difference. But I do. Here." He covered his chest with his palm. "Thank you."

She looked down her length. "I suppose you should turn me back as I was. I'm really grateful I got to be young again, but I'm ready." She clenched her eyes shut, her face screwed up.

He should, but he couldn't do it. Courage and kindness should be rewarded. Besides, it was his world. He could make a few exceptions. Kissing her forehead, he sent a languorous heat sweeping through her blood. When her legs gave out and she folded, he laid her upon the blanket, taking one last look as the fainting sun bathed her in the afternoon's gentle light.

"Sleep, Verdetta Maille," he whispered, stroking back her hair. "When you wake, check your bag. I've left you a little present I think you'll enjoy. And by the way, Lucius lives in..." He checked, using the inner sensing. "Hampstead, England. But never mind. You'll see him soon enough." He stood. "Not too far for love, I think."

She stirred. He sent her deeper into slumber. "Sleep, Verdetta. I shall carry you with me, friend."

And turning through the ethers, he returned to his palace below shell.



CHAPTER EIGHT

LUCIFER FOUND GREGOR napping in one of his comfortable chairs overlooking his garden. He placed his palm on his retainer's shoulder. When the angel jumped awake and tried to scramble to his feet, he prevented him.

"Stay. Rest a bit longer. You look weary." Carefully, Lucifer placed the *Liber Fornicationis* on Gregor's lap. "When you're up to it, see this is returned to my library with the usual spells to prevent demons from gaining access."

Gregor squinted up at him from beneath heavy lids. "You seem... different. Has something occurred?"

Lucifer gazed over the swirling circular paths behind the glass. In the very middle of his garden rested a deep pool set between towering Aquilaria trees. The trees had been transplanted from one of his estates above shell, and the oud scent they breathed into the air fragrancd his sacred space. The soil conditions in Hell prevented the resin from growing in any meaningful way. There existed just enough of it to increase his enjoyment of the water, but not enough to manufacture his cologne without searching above-shell. But even a little would be enough right now.

He looked over his shoulder at his retainer. "I have decided to take a bride, Gregor."

"Majesty?"

"Make the announcement. Find me all those mortals who bear Fallen blood so I might father a child. I prefer red hair, of course, though I will consider others. I insist upon kindness. Bravery, certainly, or she won't survive my attentions, plus, I despise cowardice." And, too, because fear so close to the throne would threaten all he had built. The archons had ever to be considered and avoided.

Gregor's eyes rounded with horror. He struggled to his feet, the book he gripped narrowly restrained from tumbling to the ground. "A child? But what will..."

"I have found my purpose."

Gregor's face lost the rest of its color, but he bowed his head. He stood quiet for several moments until he exhaled and nodded. "As you wish. I

shall compose a list of virgins that meet your specifications.” He held up his palm and gripped the book tighter with the other. “Under both Heaven’s and Hell’s requirements, your bride needs to be pure.”

“Tch! What do I care what either wishes?”

Gregor speared him on his watery gaze. “You must care, lad. Even forgetting you are bound by Heaven’s rules, the Ceremony of Blood and Seed will need to be performed, or all of Hell will revolt.”

A cold shiver of distaste traced Lucifer’s spine. He rotated away. “A human virgin will never survive the ceremony, let alone my attentions.”

“She must. In this you have no choice. If you must wed, it would be better to choose a Fallen, an angel, or even a demon. If you must marry...”

“No.” He needed someone like Verdetta, someone who would force him to gentleness. The outlines of a grand scheme were taking shape in his head. He might not yet know the full measure of what and why and who, but his instincts were rarely wrong. “My bride will be human.”

It was plain his retainer thought him a fool by the sharp sigh he emitted. So be it.

“If this is what you desire, I shall compile a list. But I beg you, Lucifer, only consider before you act, how a human female will...”

He waved his hand. “It is done. Speed, Gregor. Think speed. I wish to begin my hunt tomorrow.” Within a few hours, he should have a better idea of the ideals of the person for whom he searched.

Turning through the ethers, he reformed in his sacred garden’s inner circle. The scented resin surrounded him, transporting him to a place of perfect calm. Waving away his clothing, he stepped down into the crystal blue waters he had borrowed from Heaven. The cool splash against his skin heated a ray of hope within him he had thought never to feel again.

Thanks to Verdetta, he had a plan, and with it, the world brightened once more. He owed the old woman a debt. He reclined back against the hewn stone edge and sent his senses above-shell to watch how matters transpired with her, all the while contemplating his new goal.

A virgin. He would have to be careful. He would have to treat her like fragile glass, though he would also need to prepare her to survive the Ceremony of Blood and Seed. Prepare and not fuck...

Perhaps he should increase his harem. He would have need lots and lots of women.



Verdetta opened her eyes to discover night had fallen on the glade. Lucifer had left her lying within a circle of candles, all of them fat, black, and burning bright. A chuckle escaped her at his sense of humor. The fat black candle might not have been enough to keep him, but he had used them to keep her safe.

The flickering flames and moonlight provided enough illumination for her to make out the line of shadowy forest surrounding the grassy space. The umbra contained a strange sort of peace rather than menace. Stretching, she stilled when the usual assortment of aches and pains didn't materialize. Breath held, she lifted her hand close to her eyes. Where once her skin had creped and withered, smooth flesh rounded her bones.

Scrambling to her feet, she checked the ground more carefully. The food had disappeared. So, too, had the codex, which made sense. He wouldn't want to leave it with her, not when anyone might find and use it. But he had left the blanket and changed her pretty dress back into her original pink tee shirt and brown polyester skirt. Her underwear, however, had not re-materialized.

Funny devil. His humor had a hidden meaning, and the lack of undergarments under her original clothing was pretty easy to decipher: even if she chose to resume a life that no longer fit her, she would never be quite the same beneath. Her inner wildness had been let loose.

Feeling a bit wicked, as anyone would who had been brought to orgasm by the devil, she wrapped the front of her skirt in her fist to keep it around her waist and considered what to do next.

He had left her young. For how long, she didn't know. A day? Week? Year? Not forever – but maybe he had given her a second chance to live her life again. The fallen archangel had a heart beneath his stormy exterior.

She should be grateful beyond the measuring, and she was... mostly. Only, a strange sense of disquiet percolated up from her belly. Would she be able to start again? Life was a series of decisions. She had made them once, and they had seemed right at the time, but... if this was a new chance, shouldn't she live more fully and damn the practicalities? Isn't that what her time with Lucifer had taught her?

On the other hand, she had witnessed firsthand how life's disappointments mounted with each bad decision. It would be nice to say she had learned her lessons, but had she? How could she know until a situation presented itself again?

And even more pressing - where was she supposed to go now? Not back to Shady Grove. Not with her young body and face. If anyone believed her story, the government would rush to put her in a cage, subject her to endless, painful tests, and maybe even try to use her as a conduit to Lucifer.

Not that he needed her protection, but the officious bureaucrats likely would. As gentle as he had been with her, fire burned beneath the archangel's skin. By his own admission, he was sometimes reckless and often had a temper.

Her gaze alighted on her backpack. She frowned. Something about the backpack...

Kicking off the too-loose sneakers, because even her feet had shrunk to her twenty-six-year-old size, she skipped toward it. Her blood zinged with possibility. Rooting through the pack, she found a note scrawled in red upon a heavy linen card.

Verdetta Maille,

You will find a key in the front pocket of this bag for 721 Baker Street. Please accept the lodging as a small gesture of appreciation for all you have given me. Hope for the future is no mean thing, and I admit, I had lost it before you called. Your kindness and understanding did indeed soften me, if not for love, then for possibility. My wish is for you to live the life you once imagined. To such end, I have taken the liberty of opening an investment account in your name so the pesky day-to-day won't tempt you into practicality. You'll find the account statement, a new passport, social security card, and written history in the top drawer of the desk in the office. All you discover within the home is yours, as is the habitation itself.

March bravely into your future. Do me proud – and don't blow your second chance.



A copper key fell into her questing fingers. Her legs folded beneath her once more as she considered what to do next.

In the end, as her heart beat with anticipation, she waited out the night and etched every moment of her adventure deep into her mind so she would never forget. When dawn lit the firmament enough so she could risk the forest, she blew out the tapers, found her sneakers once more, still clutched her skirt to keep it up, and hiked back through the woods. Left behind were her walker and the picnic blanket. Perhaps someone searching for her would think she had been dragged off by a bear. Anyway, it would make a fun story over which the residents of Shady Grove could gossip, though it wouldn't be nearly as amusing as the truth.

The hike back to Shady Grove took minutes rather than hours. She wasn't even winded when she returned. Skirting the edge of the forest, she picked her way to the street and tried to remember where she could find Baker Street. To the left? Or right? In town, or in the fancy-shmancy suburbs?

Because she preferred town living, she headed left. The Glory Bus could find the center in ten minutes, which meant, given the quaint speed it drove to prevent excitement in the elderly residents seated within, she might find it in a like amount of time. Sure enough, she soon stood outside the used bookstore where her adventure had started. Like all the other shops bordering the street, it was closed.

A postman whistled down the sidewalk. She waited for him to approach, and when he did, he doffed his cap. "Can I help you, miss?"

Her heart skipped. How long had it been since a good-looking man approached her, all flushed and flirtatious? A half-century, at least. "Excuse me. I'm looking for Baker Street. Would you be able to point me in the right direction?"

The blonde's gaze ran hot over her face and down to her chest. "Baker Street? Sure. Two blocks that way." He pointed over his shoulder. "Listen, do you want me to walk you? There aren't a lot of people out yet, and a looker like you has to be careful. We could stop at *Joe's* for a cup of coffee?"

Much as she appreciated the reminder she no longer resembled an old potato, 721 Baker beckoned. She patted the youngster's cheek. "You're a good boy, but I can make it on my own. But I'll tell you what – if I don't have any success finding my true love in Hampstead, I'll come find you instead." Because now that Lucifer had alighted her passions once more, she would be damned if she let another lifetime go by unsatisfied.

Before he could do more than look confused, she skipped past him. Five steps, and she turned and blew him a kiss. His red blush deepened. It lifted her even more so she laughed with the beauty of the day. First thing after checking out the documents, she was going to find a computer and look up Lucius Hunter in Hampstead.

When she arrived before a string of houses, all beautiful, unattached, Federal brick reaching three stories tall with crisp black shutters, she marched up the stairs of the one bearing the right numbers. The key trembled in her hand, but on the third try she managed to slide it into the hole. Before she could turn the knob, however, the door flew open.

Standing in the space between hall and stoop, a young Lucius Hunter stared down at her. His mouth flew open to catch a hundred flies as his eyes widened.

“Verdetta?”

“Lucius? I didn’t expect – oh, bless that devil!”

In the next instant, she was in her true love’s arms. He wrapped her without hesitation as his lips covered hers. Soft, warm, and determined, they enticed her into a matching response. Kissing him felt like coming home. All the days between the last time they had embraced and the present melted as if they had never been. He drew her breath into his mouth, and his tongue played along the interior. An ache of longing echoed in her belly and settled between her thighs.

Yes. His kiss, his touch, were exactly what she hadn’t remembered, and better than she had dared hope. Her heart melted along with her body, and she pressed against his muscled flat stomach. After so many years, she still fit as if his contours had been made just for hers.

They kissed forever, holding each other tight. Finally, he lifted his head. His thumbs brushed her cheeks. “What’s going on, Verdetta? Do you know? I went to bed last night a dying old man. Cancer. My gut burned with agony, but now – nothing hurts. I’m like a man in his twenties. I feel like I could run ten miles, do a thousand push-ups, and still make love to you all night long.” He paused. “If this is a dream, I don’t want to wake up.” His eyes drooped at the corners. “It must be a dream. Or Heaven, but I’m not sure I’m going there. Do you know?”

She smiled and stroked his cheek, her fingers tracing the angle of his jaw and the slight indent in his chin she had forgotten. He was narrower than she remembered. His ribs expanded in a way that said he didn’t eat

much, which made sense. When they had dated, he had spent most of his time running from the law and working nights. It didn't matter. She would soon fatten him up.

"Being with you again certainly is the best dream I could ever imagine, but if it's Heaven, it's only because we're going to make it so. Let's go inside, Lucius. I'll explain everything."

A tear dripped from his pale blue eye. He swiped it away and dragged her tighter to him. "I can't believe this is happening. Thank God, I found you again. It's a miracle."

A miracle not from Heaven, but from Hell. It turned out the ruler of the realm was a nice guy. Scary, but also capable of selfless good deeds. She had never thought to ask him for a present, but he had given her the best one. A second chance. She would honor Lucifer's gift by being brave enough to take it, whatever happened. And she would honor him by doing it with as much truth as she could muster.

Verdetta kissed Lucius's chest, right over his heart. "This time, I'm doing it right. This time, I'm never letting you go."



From his pool, Lucifer focused on 721 Baker Street. Curiosity plagued him. As Verdetta had suggested, he might in time forget her, though he would remember her longer than she thought possible, but before he forgot, he would see firsthand what love looked like.

She and her Lucius lay on a bed at the top of the house. Perfect.

Moving through the ethers, he transformed his body into its snake form and shimmied up a tree planted next to the curb. From the distant branches, he could reach the windowsill outside her bedroom. Within, the lovers lay naked, wrapped in each other, breathing each other's breath. Their legs intertwined. Their arms grew around each other like vines. Lucius kept pressing Verdetta closer to him and kissing the top of her strawberry-blond head, as if he could not bear for even an inch of space to come between them. As if he couldn't bear for her to somehow get away.

If love was measured by loss, perhaps it might also be measured by how one physical form cleaved to another. It was something to think about.

"I will never let you go again, Ver, not even if we age to our true selves tomorrow. And I will offer thanks to your Lucifer for the rest of my life

for this chance, whatever happens.” Lucius swept back Verdetta’s falling golden-red locks and pressed a kiss to her forehead as she snuggled into him. “We’ll have to decide where to run. I suppose we have the whole world. I’ll get a job. I’ve become a pretty good mechanic, so it shouldn’t be too hard. Cars are always breaking down.”

“It won’t be easy,” she murmured, tilting her head back to look into his eyes. “We’ll have to navigate our children. Grandchildren. The truth might destroy them, or at least their worldview. I’m certain they won’t like letting us go off to live our own lives. But I’ve already lost my daughter. I cannot stand to lose my son... I can’t just run away.”

Lucius sighed. “No, I suppose not. I guess we’ll have to trust them not to spill the beans.”

“If you can’t trust family, who can you trust?”

He ruffled his shoulders. “All I know is, wherever you go, I’ll be right there. I won’t lose you again.” He kissed her cheek. “I was a fool not to go all alpha on you sixty years ago. I should have kidnapped you from your parents’ home and driven you to Nevada and married you before you could change your mind.” His voice sounded grim and light at the same moment.

“I would have said yes.” Her voice, though small, sounded certain. She kissed Lucius’s neck and snuggled in, before looking up at him again. “Are you certain you can forgive me for leaving you? For marrying Frank? I was such a greedy fool! And yet – I love my children. I can’t regret their existence. I just wish...”

“That you had had them with me. I know. I feel the same way about my three. I loved their mother, but it was never what I felt for you. Like I can’t breathe without you. My entire life from the day you married, I’ve had a pain. Here.” He patted his chest before circling his arm around her once more. “I never forgot you, Ver. And this time I’m not letting you go.”

“Good.” She reached up and brushed her lips against his before she laughed. “But you are going to make an honest woman out of me, aren’t you?”

Rolling her onto her back in one swift motion, he began to tickle her. Her laughter floated out the window and wrapped Lucifer in a smile. Good. It was good.

When she settled, Lucius wove his arms around her once more. She sighed. “I love you, Lucius Hunter.”

“I love you, too, Verdetta Hunter.”

She blushed a thousand shades of red, but every part of her radiated contentment.

Lucifer slid from his perch, fell through the air, and revolved back to his garden. Slithering along the ground and over the warmed stones, he dipped into the waters before dragging his sinuous form over the sunbaked edge. The heat drained the moisture from his scales as he reflected on his future.

Life made anything possible. He had been a fool to consider leaving it.



And they all lived happily ever after...
The End.
But...



Author's Note:

HELLO, EVERYONE! THANK you so much for reading, *Softened*. I hope you enjoyed this prelude to Lucifer's quest for a bride and his ensuing romance with Rose, his fated love. If you did, read on for a first chapter excerpt from *Marked, Fated Archangels: Book One, Lucifer's Temptation*.

Lucifer isn't as gentle with Rose as he was with Verdetta, but there's a very good reason for his rough seduction. If Rose is to survive the Ceremony of Blood and Seed, she'll need to understand pain and conquer her fears. Plus, she'll have to remain a virgin until the rites. But while he prepares her for what she must face, he grants her too many liberties. When she rebels, he sees the hand of Fate and Heaven.

But not all of Hell is amused by their new human queen. A union between them is not the end of their suffering – it is the beginning. Will Lucifer burn the world to save his bride?

If you have any triggers, this Dark Paranormal Romance is probably not for you as it contains all or most of them. The attached excerpt, however, does not reveal much more than a stolen kiss.

Thank you for reading! And please leave a review – it's how we writers succeed or wither on the vine.

All my love,

Roslyn St. Clair <https://roslynstclair.wixsite.com/my-site>



MARKED

FATED ARCHANGELS: BOOK ONE - LUCIFER'S TEMPTATION

Excerpt Chapter One



By: Roslyn St. Clair

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C All characters and situations are solely the result of the author's imagination, and any crossover to this world and reality, or the people operating within it, is purely coincidental. Of course, as Lucifer would tell you, there are no accidents, but only synchronicity. Any imagined connection might just be a sign directing you toward a greater truth: we are all archetypes, with more similarity than difference.

Dedicated to Kerri EBBP, who will not appreciate how she appears within the pages in a minor role, since it is she who exhorted me to be brave. I have another book planned for her where she will fit more appropriately as the image of the heroine. Thank you, Kerri, for all your support. You have my eternal friendship and appreciation.

“Do not be afraid; our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.”
Dante, 1265-1321



CHAPTER ONE: Present Day: Assault and Jeopardy

SOMETHING RIPPLED AND crawled over Rose's skin, raising all the small hairs on her arms. She glanced down, but almost before she could mark the sensation, the atmosphere around her thickened. A strange, oppressive pressure compressed against her body. It sucked the air from the lavishly appointed tea room.

She looked around to see if anyone else noticed the change in atmosphere when her gaze snagged on a swirl of shadow and light resolving over Louise's shoulder. Across the sea of white-draped tables, a well-dressed man materialized from the middle of the storm. One second, the corner chair in which he negligently reposed had been empty. In the next, he filled it.

Rose gasped. She blinked to try to clear her vision. No. Surely, she was seeing things? She ripped her attention away from him, expecting to see a waiter or the maître d' walking away from the table. No one moved anywhere in his vicinity.

Her attention rivetted back, only to find he studied her with a disarming intensity. Piercing, bright blue eyes cut through the shadows folded around him. A strange luminescence seemed to sift from beneath his skin. But even if the unusual play of opposites didn't hold her attention, his beauty would have. If she could breathe, he would have stolen her breath.

As if he heard her thoughts, he lifted his finger, a single finger, and the air zinged back to normal.

Sucking in oxygen, heart pounding, her fingers gripped the edge of the table. *How had he...?*

She blinked again, but he still didn't disappear. Around him, the shadowed slice of space hung like a pulsing, violent curtain, at odds with the otherwise bright and chattering tearoom. So did the light, until suddenly, all of it faded too. He remained. Dark. Disturbingly direct. Unhampered by social norms. His steady regard, the way he stared at her without blinking, cut through to her bones. It seemed his gaze slipped over

her skin, under her clothing, deep inside her, leaving a trail of ice and fire in his wake.

Shivers raced up her spine and her pulse skipped along her veins. She blinked a third time, holding her eyes closed longer than seemed wise as she tried to tame her racing impulses.

She was being an idiot. Obviously, he hadn't appeared from thin air... but how had she not noticed him? But people didn't just appear. She must have been daydreaming and missed the waiter seating him. She must have imagined the atmospheric changes.

Releasing her breath, she unclenched her fingers, shifted upon her tufted seat, and forced her attention back to the tea caddy at the center of her table. Tiny quartered sandwiches rested upon the uppermost plate, scones and pots of clotted cream and jam covered the middle round, and an array of delectable pastries lay along the bottom. It all looked delicious – if only she could swallow.

Her gaze darted back to the staring stranger. Blue eyes blazed. She could drown in them.

“Hello? Rose?” Ellen snapped the air with the silver sandwich tongs.

Forcing her attention back to the petite brunette, Rose grabbed the implement and snagged a couple crustless quarters from the caddy. As her hand began to tremble, the slices tumbled to her plate. Gingerly, she set the tongs upon the tablecloth.

No. Don't look at him. She was being ridiculous.

Still, a moment later, her gaze again slipped past Louise's shoulder. Glued to the stranger's hand, a glass of something golden sweated in the chill room. The beads of condensation kissed his long fingers, as if his touch heated the crystal, ice cubes, and liquid within. He made no move to drink. Assured and elegant, he lounged in his chair like it was some sort of throne, all tensile strength wrapped in lean, serpentine swagger. As she watched, he crossed his long legs, the deliberate motion bringing the luxurious fabric of his suit into minute folds. She followed the ripples along his angled planes and forgot to breathe.

“Right, Rose?”

Her attention pivoted back to her friends. She tried to focus, but her awareness returned to the ebony-haired man with the excoriating blue eyes. His lips quirked into a devil's smile, a strangely possessive

expression that whispered of dark bedrooms, velvet drapes, paddles on the walls, and... her— beneath him.

Every part of her tightened. At the same time, warning flares raced through her veins to meet at the nape of her neck. Her fingers lifted to cover the spot, but she forced them back to the table. Her gaze, though, remained locked upon his, unable to retreat.

Searing blue eyes charred her further as his slightly-dimpled chin tipped downwards. It was another possessive gesture, as if he agreed with himself that he could have her.

Panic twisted in her belly. Despite the way he held her glued to him like a magnet, she broke their connection. Anyway, she was a fool. He was probably smiling his Lothario grin at someone behind her, someone who knew how to deal with a man like him. He must be used to drooling females zinging and liquifying whenever he glanced their way. Except... was he used to instilling terror, too?

She rubbed her arms as another icy chill raced down her spine. She needed to get a grip. Yes, he projected power and confidence... and danger... but so what? He wouldn't attack her in the middle of the hotel tearoom, not with so many witnesses. Plus, there had to be some sort of security she could call if he turned out to be the predator he seemed. Which was almost certainly her imagination.

She glanced around the room. She wasn't the only one staring at him. Nearly half the room seemed rivetted, manners forgotten, but likely with good reason. He was stunning. He was lust on legs.

She couldn't help but look back. Holding her gaze tight with his, he tipped back his drink, his movement unhurried and somehow calculated. Lush lips folded around the rim of the glass, and she felt his mouth whisper against her neck in a long, sensuous slide.

Jerking from the unexpected sensation, she grappled for her jam knife and dropped it. The utensil clattered against the porcelain plate.

Louise and Ellen swiveled their heads towards her, their disagreement interrupted.

"Sorry." The apology pressed over the stone blocking her throat.

Her friends returned to their conversation. She couldn't follow, because all her antenna stood on end and screamed for her to run. Or maybe, to sit very still, like a rabbit in the presence of a wolf, and hope the lupine would overlook her or mistake her for a cabbage. There was nothing

wolf-like about the man, though, except for the way her arms dotted with geese-feet in response to his feral energy. If anything, he would probably shoot dragon flame.

A sudden snicker of laughter choked in her throat, and released her from her odd stasis. A dragon? Really? Her imagination had always been too good.

As her pulse steadied once more, she reached for one of the sandwich slices, but instead of grabbing it, her fingers fluttered to the edge of the plate. They stroked the gilded edge. Maybe Louise and Ellen had been right when they suggested she see a therapist. Her reaction to the debonair stranger was all out of sorts. It was one thing to eye a handsome man and pretend he stared at her instead of someone more interesting. It was another to imagine he might barbeque her over scones- with dragon fire.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Louise interrupted Ellen’s diatribe detailing all the things wrong with her current beau and juttled her chin towards Rose’s plate. “If you don’t want your watercress, I’ll take it. You can keep the salmon.” She wrinkled her cute button nose below her enormous patrician blue eyes.

“Here.” Rose pushed her plate closer to her friend. In doing so, she glanced over Louise’s shoulder again at the man in the tailored dark suit.

He winked.

Inhaling roughly, Rose choked and began to sputter. Reaching for her cup of Lapsang Souchong, she brought it to her lips and hid behind the cup. The smoky flavor helped settle her throat until she peeked back at him over the rim. A frown furrowed between his elegantly-arched brows, as if she had confused him with her reaction.

No, not her. Just... something. Someone else. Probably.

“You don’t look well, Rose. Are you sick?” Ellen leaned back in her chair, her shoulders touching the furniture for the first time since they had been seated. “Are we moving on to the scones even though you haven’t touched your sandwiches?”

Their tea ritual was every bit as choreographed as a ballet. Once a month since college, they spent a Saturday together doing what they loved: perusing a museum exhibit, followed by afternoon tea and gossip. Rose always looked forward to their outings, but today...

She made an effort to smile at her friend. “I ate a big lunch.” She nodded. “Scones. Let’s.”

Ellen regarded her from under beetled brows before she elbowed Louise. "I told you not to let her traipse off to the Egyptian wing on her own. You know how she gets."

Louise shrugged. "So? She likes mummies. It's still art."

Ellen sniffed and picked up her cup. "If you say so. I don't. It's bad enough she's wasting her degree by toiling in a metaphysical bookshop, but I guess, after everything that happened..."

"I'm right here, Ellen. I can hear you." Not that it mattered. Ellen never quibbled over voicing the truth as she saw it. Rose fiddled with her fork. Despite her best efforts at ignoring the criticism, as always, it settled within her chest like an anvil.

Ellen glanced at Rose before turning back to Louise. "It's not as if she's going to find someone decent when all she can talk about is Egyptian magic, soul-snatching, crystals, and no..." Her nose scrunched, she circled her hand in the air, and raised her cup to her lips.

"Noetic science. I talk about other things, too." But Rose pitched her voice low, because for the first time, she wondered if Ellen might be right about how she had shifted out of normal society. Witness her reaction to the handsome man who stared at her. Or not at her. Since Scott, her attention had been skewed to the paranormal as she searched for reasons and answers. Maybe it was no wonder she imagined handsome, perilous strangers ready to pounce and capable of breathing fire.

Her attention flickered back to the elegant man. He had placed his drink upon the table while she spoke with her friends, and now his long fingers caressed the top of the glass. Still, he stared fixedly at her. Or someone else behind her. Probably. Not that it mattered. He wasn't one of those decent men Ellen thought she should find.

No, he was too... too. Too graceful. Too handsome. Too... virile.

An uneasy hunger cramped her stomach as she pictured those dexterous fingers slipping along her skin like they did upon the rim of the crystal. Unlike Scott, the stranger would move with practiced ease, as unhurried and patient in taking what he wanted as he was sipping a drink. But would he make love to her, or stab her ten times and pick her gristle from between his teeth? Menace oozed from him like dark, sticky syrup, melding with the odd play of light and shadow sieving around him again.

But if she mentioned him to her friends, they would accuse her of attention-seeking. Worse, they would say she was imagining scenarios so

she didn't have to deal with Scott's death, and shouldn't she have called a therapist by now?

She looked away and bit her lip, but when she peeked back, he leaned forward, his pose no longer indolent. The blue of his eyes darkened and pierced through her flesh like blades. Sudden pain flared in a line down her front.

Gripping the chair arms, she bit her bottom lip between her teeth and willed herself not to scream. It took extraordinary effort. When the pain receded and she could move, she threw her napkin on the table and pushed back her chair. "I'll be— that is, I... I'll be back."

Ignoring the way her friends' eyes rounded, she hastened through to the lobby and turned right. A long hallway stretched to the bathroom. Halfway down the corridor, a soft rustle fluttered behind her. Spinning, she cried out and raised her hands in a defensive posture, but only empty space washed at her heels.

The thundering in her chest increased so she practically jogged the rest of the distance. Once inside the bathroom, she nodded at the gray-haired attendant and sought the last sink at the far end. Turning the cold faucet full blast, she bowed over the stream and tried to steady her pulse. She wasn't usually so unnerved by men, or by catching second glances. It was part of having red hair and green eyes. Not too many people had her coloring, unless she wanted to decamp to Ireland where she could find ten of herself on every block. And anyway...

Anyway, it didn't matter where she tried to run. She wasn't going to outrun the guilt, and wasn't it the real reason she had become so overwhelmed by a stranger's stare?

A square of paper appeared in her peripheral vision, interrupting her thoughts. Damn. She had left her purse at the table and the attendant would expect a tip. Taking a deep breath, she straightened and reached for the towel. "I'm sorry. I left my purse..."

Her voice edged into a garbled cry as she scrabbled back and away from the very man she had tried to escape. She didn't get far. The paper he held fluttered to the floor as he grabbed her wrist and pulled her hard against his muscled frame. Air whooshed from her lungs as her sex united with his muscled thigh. His free hand wrapped her at the waist, preventing her from pulling away.

She pushed against his chest. He didn't budge. He was stone all the way down.

A tiny mewl escaped her as she studied the room behind him, looking for the attendant, for another guest, anyone. They were all alone.

"Shh." His clasp tightened to the point of pain. "Be calm."

"C-calm?" The word stuttered and caught. She swallowed and checked behind him again before she dared to meet his excoriating gaze. Up close, his eyes were so bright, they burned like blue suns. "H-how did you get in here? Let me go!" She pushed again. Nothing.

"Please, don't scream. I despise sharp noises." His voice held a rumble of honey sticky enough to catch her attention. Dark, deep, and beguiling, the sound clung to clipped consonants and precise rounded vowels. She could get lost in its resonance. "Rose. You are as lovely as your name, aren't you?" He examined her face, his gaze dropping down her neck.

A cavern opened within her at her name upon his lips. It took her a few moments to figure out why, but when she did, panic welled within her. In response, his blue eyes blazed hotter, as if he read her mind.

He knew who she was.

She tried to think. Failed. Did she know him? Was he stalking her? "Y-you shouldn't... be in here."

He laughed, the expression revealing even white teeth and rendering him impossibly beautiful. "Shouldn't I?" His thumb stroked the tender skin of her wrist, sending fire points shooting through her body to land between her legs. She gasped in response and his smile grew broader. "Oh, I think you'll do very well, Rose. It took a while to find you, you know. I took my time. I wanted to be certain."

She opened her mouth, intending to scream, but all she could manage was a sort of inarticulate gurgle as his hand slipped around her back so his pinky pressed to the sensitive spot just above the crease of her buttocks.

Liquid fire flowed through her in response. Instead of crying for help, she moaned.

Without hesitation, he covered her lips. His tongue slipped through to stroke with expert ease, drawing her out and into him. She tasted bourbon and something spicy-hot. Cinnamon, maybe. Definitely smoke. But then she lost her ability to decipher his taste as he deepened the kiss, his lips flitting and demanding, pulling on hers until her body turning to sticky candy under the onslaught. Another moan rose in her throat. He swallowed

it. His fingers, the ones around her wrist, released and buried in her hair, pressing her mouth closer still. He inhaled her until every part of her thrummed with wanting and she kissed him back with equal fervor.

He was delectable. He was like heady wine. It wasn't enough. She couldn't get enough. She pressed into him, her body aligning with his as if made in some special mold. A delicious languor eased through her, all her senses focused upon his lips, the rippling muscles under her fingers, the scent of his skin, smoky, woodsy-sweet, and exotic. If not for him holding her upright, she would have puddled at his feet.

When he broke their embrace, he studied her as she panted and tried to retrieve her senses. His scent wove her in invisible manacles: smoke, something green, musky, and sweet. She wanted, needed, to inhale more of him, and so she leaned into him before she remembered she shouldn't. No, he was dangerous, predatory, and he appeared far less affected than she by their kiss, though his glowing blue eyes had softened.

Tracing her cheekbone with his thumb, his other hand removed from the sensitive spot at her buttocks to her hip. He squeezed gently, until, with reluctance written on his face, both his hands fell away. He took a half-step back.

She touched her vibrating lips. "Why?" Her voice emerged as a whisper.

"Because I claim you. Because you are mine." With infinite slowness, he ran the backs of his knuckles over her jawline, down her neck, and between her breasts. Bright sharp pain erupted at the spot where he paused. He took another step backward and dropped his hand. "Mine."

An ache of real fire burned like a brand. Pressing her palm over the spot, tears pricked her eyes. "What did you just do?"

"Marked you with a tiny interim symbol. Marked you as mine." A brief look of regret crossed his perfect features. "I'll grant you the afternoon to put your affairs in order. Rose." He lifted her right hand and clasped it in both of his. Bringing it to his lips, he placed a gentle kiss upon her fingers in an elegant, courtly gesture. "I'll see you soon."

He stalked to the door. His gait held the tensed readiness of a jungle cat before a pounce. Sinuous. Sensual. Deadly. At the same time, he strode like he owned the world. As he passed the attendant who once again stood just inside the frame of the entrance, he paused. For a moment, Rose imagined he would stab the woman dead.

Instead, the gray-haired employee fell to the floor, her arms outstretched in front of her, her nose pressed to the tile. “Majesty.”

As if it was the most natural thing in the world, he angled one of his polished black shoes. In a lavish display of submission, she kissed the shiny leather over and over before he gently kicked her off. With a tilt of his head, he gazed over his shoulder. A small smile lifted his cushion lips before he disappeared.

He just... disappeared.

Rose sank to the ground as her legs gave out.

~End of Chapter Highlight~



Author's Note:

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR reading! If you agree that Lucifer might be a maligned mythological character deserving of redemption, please read *Marked – Book One, Fated Archangels: Lucifer's Temptation*. I don't usually like to write stories that don't tell it all in one volume, but the fact is, he demands a lot longer tribute in which his tale might be told. So, coming soon after *Marked*, Lucifer's romance with Rose will continue. Hell's ceremony and the trials and tribulations of marriage to a human are resolved in a Happily-ever-after in, *Raised – Book Two, Fated Archangels: Lucifer's Redemption*. And after Lucifer and Rose? Find out what happens when Archangel Michael takes Lucifer's throne in Hell and meets his fated love. She's a demon and a lawyer (yes, there is a difference), and she rocks his world. Their story doesn't have a title yet, but since the first pages are written, I thought I'd share the future.

And please leave reviews (okay, okay, I'd really prefer the positive ones, because an author lives and dies by them – anything under 4 stars hurts) on Amazon, Goodreads, B&N, and wherever you purchase your escapes into book reality.

As always, please remember: these novels contain just about every trigger. It's Hell and he's the devil. I do not say this lightly – I firmly believe that what we read informs our world, and while I also truly believe certain character arcs require depravity and dubious consent, and I also believe that bravery in facing situations leads to more courage, if you have been injured, or your life has given you reason to find certain matters distasteful, these may not be the books for you. For the rest of you – happy reading!

And please follow me on social media. I'm not the best at posting, but I try...

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About the Author

Roslyn writes from the comfort of her sunroom, dog at hand to interrupt as much as caninely possible. Her life is pretty normal: husband, son, dog that thinks he's a cat, and endless bills, which is probably why her imagination goes right to archangels, monsters, demons, and fated true love, not to mention the darker stuff. No one wants to read about her sink full of dirty dishes. Magick, transformation, and understanding the maligned, however, are her turn-ons, and she hopes they'll be yours, too. One day, she hopes to understand the true nature of this world. Until then, she enjoys creating it.

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Read more at [Roslyn St. Clair's site](#).